DEMOCRATS WEIGH THEIR OWN NUCLEAR OPTION

MICHAEL CROWLEY

REGIME CHANGE AT THE WORLD BANK

SEBASTIAN MALLABY

*SPRING BOOKS*

James Wood, James Wolcott, Adam Kirsch

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

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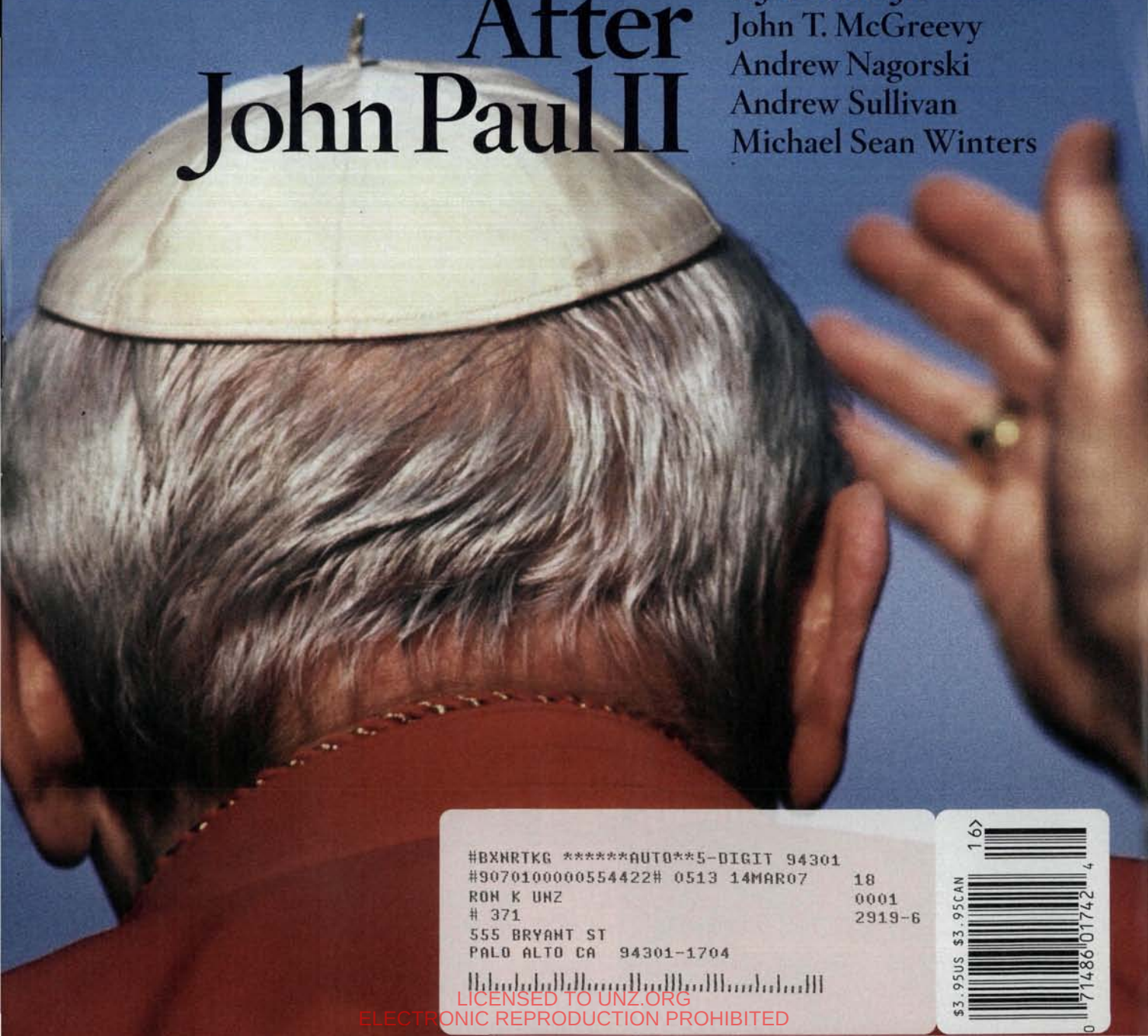
## After John Paul II

E.J. Dionne Jr.
John T. McGreevy
Andrew Nagorski
Andrew Sullivan
Michael Sean Winters



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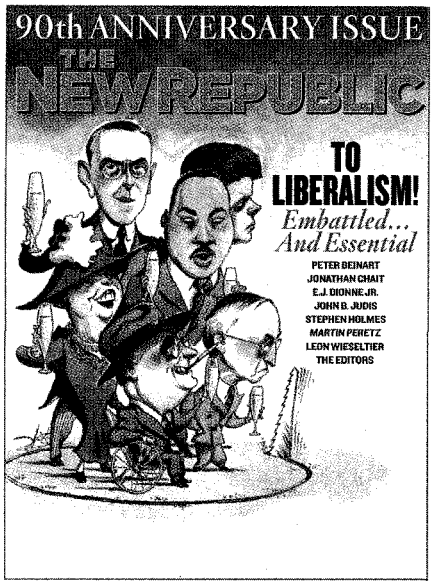


## GETTING RELIGION

IN HIS EXCELLENT PIECE FOR THE ninetieth anniversary issue, E.J. Dionne Jr. credits me with the invention of Atheists for Niebuhr ("Faith Full," February 28). The real credit belongs to that acute philosopher and historian of ideas, Morton G. White of the Institute for Advanced Study. In 1954, White quizzically attributed the view that religion was insight into human nature to "a group that might be called 'Atheists for Niebuhr.'" Some of us, like Perry Miller, took pride in the witticism.

**ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR.**
***New York, New York***

DIONNE BEMOANS THE FACT THAT secular liberals cannot unite effectively with religiously committed liberals. Part of the reason is that the fundamental response of secular liberals to the issues confronting us is based on scientific method. For obvious reasons, secularists suspect that religiously committed liberals will abandon the secular vision of liberalism when that vision contradicts the faith-based assertions adherents hold dear. Putting immense amounts of money and energy into worshipping a supreme being who seems so determinedly indifferent to human catastrophe is hardly a formula for successful problem-solving.

**ROBERT PRIMACK**
***Gainesville, Florida***

## WORDS GAME

PETER BEINART SUGGESTS THAT Democrats "recognize[e] U.S. fallibility" and acknowledge America's less-than-democratic history in the Third World ("More Than Words," February 28). This will inspire the U.S. public? Beinart is calling for a rhetoric "that fuses idealism with humility." He's right that the country's foreign policy elite should be more humble. But, if he thinks that's the way for Democrats to gain an upper hand over Republicans on foreign policy, he grossly misunderstands the U.S. electorate. In the post–September 11 era, few swing voters will warm up to a party that humbly admits the faults of the United States—at least not while Republicans offer nationalistic certitude.

**STEPHEN K. MEDVIC**
***Assistant Professor of Government***
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***Lancaster, Pennsylvania***

## FREE FOR ALL

JONATHAN CHAIT IS CORRECT THAT some who support Social Security reform want it abolished, even if this has to happen slowly ("Fact Finders," February 28). And the reasoning behind this hasn't much to do with the particular superior results of such reform (vis-à-vis the national economy, individual retirement benefits, or gross national product), only with the general idea that a free society, one without a bloated public sector—that is, one with a government of strictly limited scope—is superior overall to one wherein government meddles in everything. Yes, this is sort of a priori rather than pragmatic, although not quite in the silly way Chait caricatures it: History shows that freedom is, in the main, a better way to reach desirable goals than coercion. It isn't a matter of "liberty, come hell or high water." What is interesting in Chait's essay is that no mention is made of how most liberals are similarly a priori supporters of various civil libertarian ideas, such as freedom of speech, due process in criminal law, and others. Here it is conservatives who have been more pragmatic: If prior restraint works, let's use it; if giving up habeas corpus for a while achieves greater security, go for it; if censorship achieves some good, it's fine; et cetera. Liberals, however, have, in the main, opposed this—that is, after all, what the American Civil Liberties Union is all about.

I wonder why Chait fails to discuss this internal conflict within liberalism and, indeed, within conservatism—why is pragmatism so good when it comes to some policies but should be avoided when it comes to others? At least libertarians tend to have a coherent approach that they can apply to all circumstances: They advocate liberty across the board, as Milton Friedman is quoted in Chait's essay. They trust the lessons of history and have an understanding of human nature, namely that free men and women will deal with problems better than those who are regimented about by others. Chait hasn't managed to challenge this truly principled approach in the slightest, and for good reason—it is, after all, the stance of most of the practical sciences in which general principles are relied upon to guide future actions, leaving changes to be made only once the principles have been shown to require rethinking.

**TIBOR R. MACHAN**
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*continued on page 45*

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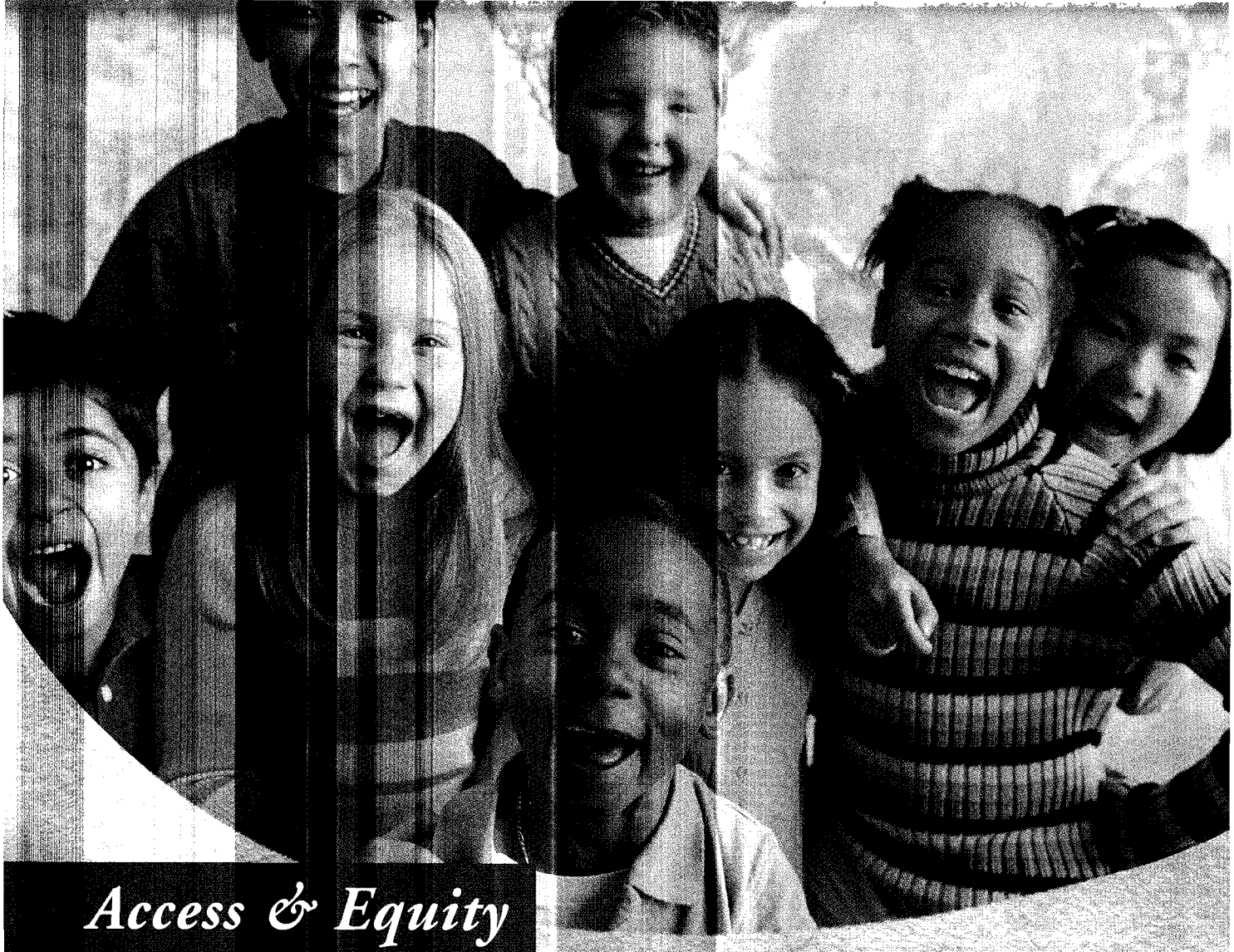

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# Think Tank

## TRB FROM WASHINGTON

THE LATEST TWIST IN THE Social Security debate isn't progressive benefit cuts or add-on accounts. It's a growing belief among Democrats that the party needs to offer an alternative to the president's proposal. Proponents of this view argue that, while George W. Bush may not have sold many voters on privatization, he has begun convincing them there's a crisis, which Democrats could be blamed for ignoring.

At first glance, this logic seems so uncompelling that you're at a loss to explain how anyone could embrace it. There is simply nothing going in the realm of public opinion or on Capitol Hill to suggest that privatization might succeed; the only practical effect of a Democratic plan would be to help Bush. Nor is there much evidence that Democrats suffer by failing to acknowledge the ostensible crisis. According to a recent survey by Democratic pollsters Geoff Garin and Guy Molyneux, Democrats won't be blamed for ignoring the Social Security issue because voters actually believe Bush's solution would be worse than the status quo.

But it turns out there is a deeper explanation for Democrats' growing obsession with presenting their own proposal. Increasingly, Democrats think that their failure to offer a Social Security plan reflects a fundamental lack of ideas—the most damning indictment you can make of a political party. What these Democrats don't understand is that offering a Social Security proposal would do nothing to solve their larger idea problem.

It's easy to see how confusion on this point might arise. After the election, many in the party, on the right, and in the press concluded that Democrats had fared badly in comparison to Bush, who, the thinking went, was burbling over with ideas about ownership and democracy. "The Democrats are leaderless and reeling, seemingly bereft of inspiring ideas," wrote *Newsweek*'s Howard Fineman in December. At the same time, Republicans controlled the policy agenda, and the president considered Social Security his legacy issue. For the foreseeable future, Social Security reform was going to be the only domestic policy idea in town.

These realities have gradually converged in recent months, as political commentators have used the Social Security debate as an opportunity to hit Democrats for being at sea intellectually. This take is, in fact, not so different from the talking points Republicans have lustily repeated to goad the Democrats into action. "Putting off the problem . . . shows a lack of ideas and a lack of being direct and forthright with the American public," Senator Rick Santorum has proclaimed. "And I don't think that will be rewarded in November of '06."

But the convergence didn't take truly credible form until early March, when Democratic strategists James Carville and Stan Greenberg dashed off a widely read memo. Broadly speaking, they noted, only 44 percent of voters believed the Democrats had "new ideas for addressing the country's problems." And, disconcertingly for the party, Carville and Greenberg cited a recent NPR poll showing that the Social Security issue was exacerbating these problems. "Voters are looking for reform, change and new ideas," they concluded, "but Democrats seem stuck in concrete."

Carville and Greenberg cited the Kerry campaign as exhibit A in their brief. And yet, if ever there were a piece of evidence casting doubt on the link between "having ideas" and offering specific plans, John Kerry is it. The Kerry campaign positively teemed with reform proposals—most of them far more innovative than the mishmash of benefit cuts and tax increases Democrats believe will fix Social Security. Kerry had an ambitious health care plan, a plan for saving manufacturing jobs, a plan for limiting frivolous lawsuits. On national security, he had a plan for increasing the size of the Army, for adding Special Forces, for securing loose nuclear material. Lest anyone miss the point, Kerry used the phrase "I have a plan" *13 times* in the second presidential debate. Six months later, Democrats have never appeared more adrift.

Meanwhile, despite the best efforts of the Washington press corps to suggest otherwise, Bush has never put forth anything resembling a Social Security plan. The closest he has come is his suggestion that Social Security reform should create private investment accounts carved out of the payroll tax and that the transition costs should not be covered by raising taxes. When pressed for more detail—say, how he *would* pay for the accounts, or how he'd resolve Social Security's long-term actuarial problems (which private accounts don't address)—the president has punted. "I have not laid out a plan yet—intentionally," he said at a recent press conference. "I have laid out principles."

Clearly, what voters mean when they claim that a politician or a party lacks ideas isn't that they lack specific proposals; it's that they lack a larger, animating philosophy. John Edwards, for example, leveled a comprehensive critique of this administration—that it was shifting society's burdens from people who made their living from capital to people who made their living working—that gave individual proposals meaning. Tellingly, most of these proposals lost their resonance once the Kerry campaign appropriated them into its wonkish miasma.

There's no question that any Democrat looking to run for president in 2008 needs to spend the next three years contemplating how he or she intends to compete on this level. The party's congressional leadership could benefit from the exercise, too. But, in the meantime, offering a Social Security plan would be a step in the wrong direction. If Democrats offer a plan that results in a compromise, they look even more bereft than they did before—engaging in the kind of mindless difference-splitting that won them such intellectual victories as lowering the official price tag of the president's 2001 tax cut from $1.6 to $1.35 trillion. And, if they offer a plan and no compromise emerges, they will have tacitly acknowledged that the Social Security crisis is urgent—just not quite urgent enough to set aside partisanship and resolve. In either case, it's hard to see how Democrats will have bolstered their claims to intellectual seriousness.

In all of this, it's important not to lose sight of political reality. Democrats are the country's minority party, whose job it is to defend core legislative priorities and to punish the majority party for its mistakes. (See 1994, Republican revolution of.) If congressional Democrats offer their own Social Security plan, they will have failed on both counts. **NOAM SCHEIBER**

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# See No Evil

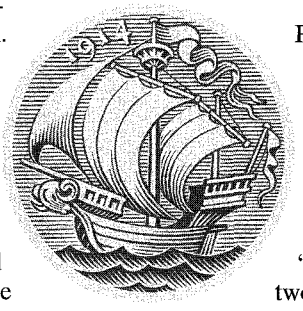
LEAVE IT TO Pat Roberts, water-carrier for the White House and chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, to show what President Bush was truly after from his handpicked commission investigating faulty intelligence about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Last week, the commission — chaired by Judge Laurence Silberman and former Senator Chuck Robb — delivered a report that excoriated the intelligence community for getting Iraq's WMD programs "dead wrong" but exonerated the Bush administration of charges that it pressured the intelligence community to reach these erroneous conclusions. Before Roberts had even finished reading the 600-page report, he issued a statement contending that "we have now heard it all regarding prewar intelligence" and terming any further investigation "a monumental waste of time."

Roberts's performance was as farcical as it was predictable. Last year, in order to ensure unanimous support for the Senate Committee's own Iraq report, the Kansas Republican promised his Democratic colleagues that he would conduct a second investigation into the administration's role in producing intelligence and its use of that intelligence in making the case for war. On this score, the Silberman-Robb report is either silent or raises more questions than it answers. To leave the commission's work as the final official word on the matter, as Roberts intends, is to ensure that we have an incomplete accounting of what led us into Iraq.

Start with the commission's treatment of whether intelligence was politicized by the Bush administration. While it reports that no analysts changed their assessment of Iraq's WMD programs at the administration's behest, it makes numerous nebulous references to the influence of administration policy preferences. "[A]nalysts operated in an environment shaped by intense policymaker interest in Iraq," the commission writes, which "contributed to a climate in which the Intelligence Community was too willing to accept dubious information as providing confirmation of that assumption [that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD]. Neither analysts nor users were sufficiently open to being told that affirmative, specific evidence to support the assumption was, at best, uncertain in content or reliability."

How exactly this "environment" or "climate" pervaded the intelligence community is unexplored by the commission. So it remains difficult to understand how the CIA's January 2002 assessment that "Iraq has probably continued at least low-level theoretical R&D" on its nuclear program was transformed by October 2002, when the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was completed, into: "If Baghdad acquires sufficient fissile material from abroad, it could make a nuclear weapon within several months to a year." Paul Pillar, the National Intelligence Council's Middle East officer, told the commission that "permeat[ing] the analytic atmosphere … [was] the gathering conviction among analysts that war with Iraq was inevitable by the time the NIE was being prepared." If he's right, this amounts to a dual indictment of an intelligence community that abdicated its responsibility to deliver unvarnished assessments and an administration unwilling to let the facts get in the way of its predetermined course of action.

In fact, the question of how the Bush administration used the intelligence it had available was beyond the commission's narrow mandate. But determining what administration officials knew while they were making dire statements about Iraq's WMD remains central to any thorough accounting of prewar intelligence failures. For example, intelligence officials insist that, in 2002, they repeatedly informed aides to then–National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice that Energy Department analysts disputed that an intercepted shipment of aluminum tubes could have been intended for an Iraqi nuclear weapons program, yet Rice told CNN that September that the tubes "are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs." Only an official investigation can settle why this happened.



Which is exactly what Roberts is refusing to conduct, despite promising, when the Senate report was released last July, that "I have told everybody on the other side of the aisle, everybody on our side of the aisle, 'We'll proceed with phase two. It is a priority.' I made my commitment, and it will be done." Over the last month, Roberts has displayed irritation when asked when he will keep his promise, contending that another investigation wouldn't "achieve any possible progress." Of course, if Roberts is tired of being dogged by suggestions that he's enabling a whitewash, he knows exactly how to dispel them. ■

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# NOTEBOOK

## ACTIVIST JUDGES, WATCH YOUR BACK . . . FOR SANDY BERGER, JUST A WRIST-SLAP

### JUDGE NOT

THE GOP HAS BEEN ON A TIRADE against "activist judges" for a while now, but, so far at least, few solutions to this pesky problem have surfaced. What, after all, could Republicans do to curb those robed rogues? Kill them with kindness by putting them on Tom DeLay's campaign payroll with his wife and daughter? Or perhaps just kill them?

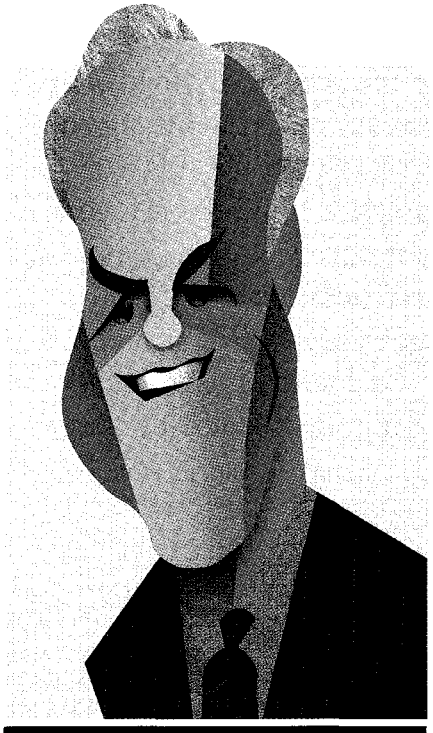
As it turns out, the simplicity of this latter option has made it the favorite. Last week, responding to news that Terri Schiavo had died, Tom DeLay cryptically told reporters that "the time will come for the men responsible for this to answer for their behavior." And, if those menacing words were a little too ambiguous, just a few days later, DeLay's Republican colleague in the Senate, John Cornyn, put a finer point on the issue.

Speaking on the Senate floor, the former Texas Supreme Court judge mused that violence against judges may be a direct comeuppance of "raw political or ideological decisions" made from the bench. Cornyn didn't cite the heinous crimes against the judiciary that recently occurred in Chicago and Atlanta, alluding instead to "some recent episodes of courthouse violence." But he speculated that, when "judges are making political decisions yet are unaccountable to the public . . . it builds and builds to the point where some people engage in violence."

Cornyn was quick to attach the caveat that this behavior was still "certainly without any justification." And Senator Bill Frist, stepping up to do GOP damage control the next day, soothingly asserted his belief that "we have a fair and independent judiciary today." But what's fairness without a little fear?

### CONDUCT UNBECOMING

ON MAY 19, 2004, LIEUTENANT General Ricardo Sanchez, then–commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, gave sworn testimony about Iraqi prisoner abuse to the Senate Armed Services Committee. During the hearing, Rhode Island Democrat Jack Reed asked Sanchez about a report in *USA Today* that he had "ordered or approved the use of sleep deprivation, intimidation by guard dogs, excessive noise and inducing fear as an interrogation method for a prisoner in Abu Ghraib prison." Sanchez replied that he "never approved any of those measures to be used within [my command] at any time in the last year."



*John Cornyn*

But, according to a declassified memo issued by Sanchez on September 14, 2003, the general's testimony was at best misleading. Sanchez designed the memo specifically to "establis[h] the interrogation and counter-resistance policy" for detainees in Iraq. Every technique cited by Reed last May is included in Sanchez's memo: "Presence of Military Working Dog" (which, Sanchez helpfully explained, "exploits Arab fear of dogs"); "Sleep Management" ("Detainee provided minimum 4 hours sleep per 24-hour period, not to exceed 72 continuous hours"); "Yelling, Loud Music, and Light Control" ("Used to create fear, disorient detainee and prolong capture shock"); and three different methods to instill and manipulate levels of fear.

Of those measures, only the fear-control techniques are contained within the Army's Geneva Conventions–compliant interrogations field manual, even though President Bush has said that Iraqi detainees are entitled to Geneva protections. In discussing one interrogation technique, Sanchez even warned "other nations who believe that [Enemy Prisoners of War] protections apply to detainees may view this technique as inconsistent with Geneva," but, rather than proscribing the measure, he adds vaguely, "consideration should be given to these views prior to application." It is very difficult to escape the conclusion—which the Pentagon has always fiercely denied—that Sanchez was approving violations of the Geneva Conventions. (Indeed, U.S. Central Command rescinded Sanchez's memo the following month and approved methods more in line with the Army field manual.)

The American Civil Liberties Union, which obtained the memo last week, wants the Justice Department to investigate Sanchez for perjury. But apparently the Pentagon feels a promotion is a more appropriate response. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in October that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Joint Chiefs Chairman General Richard Myers intend to make Sanchez a four-star general. As for accountability—the Pentagon must still have it listed as missing in action.

### PAPER TRAIL

SO SANDY BERGER WILL NOT HAVE to go to prison, and this is due only to the compassion of George W. Bush's Justice Department. In a plea bargain with the Department's Public Integrity

DAVID COWLES

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Section, Berger confessed to everything he had denied after his disheveled self was suddenly caught in the very act of filching secret documents from the National Archives about Al Qaeda, the pursuit of which had never really grabbed his attentions. He had carried on this clumsy charade for months: They had gotten mixed in with his own notes; he didn't know he had them; he had only one document. They were in his pockets, in his pants, in his socks: the national security adviser as Lou Costello. As it turns out, Berger had stolen five "top clearance" papers, variations on a single topic: the aborted millennium bombing at Los Angeles International Airport.

Once he brought them home, he now admits, he attempted a seamless paste-and-scissors job, apparently to fabricate a historical narrative flattering to his own and Bill Clinton's record. Why the tough guys at Justice are being so merciful to the dishonorable Berger is a mystery; they have even conceded that he might have his security clearance restored after three years. This, for a man who has no respect for the elementary rules of official secrecy, even though he was the top security and foreign policy coordinator of the previous administration and a serious candidate for secretary of state in a future Democratic administration. But he is a serious candidate no more. His misfortune is his country's luck.

## DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

DUE TO AN EDITING ERROR, THE Correspondence page of the March 28 & April 4 issue contained a misleading sentence. Contributor Martha C. Nussbaum originally wrote that Jawaharlal Nehru had advised his daughter, Indira, to consult Mahatma Gandhi about her upcoming marriage to Feroze Gandhi (no relation). A rewording of Nussbaum's sentence led to the misimpression that Indira had adopted the surname Gandhi prior to her marriage. We regret the inaccuracy. ■

# TNR.commentary

## IRAQ'D

SPENCER ACKERMAN

**BUT WHICH DIRECTION?:** Leave it to Anthony Shadid of *The Washington Post* to contribute the most illuminating postelection story yet about the Shia clerisy's political intentions. Under the principle of *irshad wa tawjeeh*, which Shadid translates as "guidance and direction," the Najaf *marjaiya* (the Shia clerisy) views itself as a "safety valve" for the political system, in the phrase of one such cleric, channeling popular sentiment to ensure that, in the event of gridlock, the (clerically determined) correct outcome is reached. During the recent impasse over the formation of a new government, for instance, senior clerics threatened million-man demonstrations to force movement.

But the importance of Shadid's April 3 story lies in its illustration of how the clerics might be setting a trap for themselves. The *marjaiya* is trying to figure out how to exercise power over political developments while, as Shadid puts it, "avoiding the example of neighboring Iran, where the standing of respected clerics diminished as they seized government and were blamed for its failings over 25 years." The clerics want subtlety to be their calling card, but, in the event of a crisis, "the *marjaiya* ... will not simply stand and watch. It must do something," according to a spokesman for one of Najaf's four senior ayatollahs. The reason why is simple: Under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, they've invested a tremendous amount of credibility in making the political process a success—that is, to ensure it benefits the Shia without trampling the Sunnis and the Kurds—and can't turn back now. But, in a deeply divided country, politics inclines toward stalemate, and Iraq's minorities will surely seek institutional safeguards to constrain the Shia.

And there's the problem for the clerisy. According to cleric Ghaith Shubari, who is close to the Najaf religious establishment, "The *marjaiya* cannot abandon the people in any stage in which there are problems or obstacles in the political process." And demagogic clerics will seek to ensure it: Shadid quotes a disciple of Moqtada Al Sadr mocking the *marjaiya* as ineffectual and callous for allowing "the rule of the majority" to be frustrated. That is, if clerical intercession in politics becomes a fact, the clerics risk popular discontent if they don't intercede in particular disputes. It's possible that politically acute clerics like Sistani can manage this tension, but Sistani won't be around forever. The clerics may be about to learn that they may be holy, but they're far from perfect.

## &c.

NOAM SCHEIBER

**HILLARY'S SUCKER-PUNCH PROBLEM:** This passage from *The New York Times* on April 1 explains, in a nutshell, why it's going to be so hard for Hillary Clinton to win a presidential election:

> In a fund-raising e-mail message sent out on Thursday, Mrs. Clinton's campaign also said her critics were preparing an advertising campaign against her similar to the one orchestrated by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, a group that attacked Senator John Kerry's Vietnam service during the presidential election.
>
> "The right wing is already getting ready, naming Hillary as their 'No. 1 target' and boasting about their 'Swift Boat' style ads," said the e-mail message, which was sent by Ann F. Lewis, the director of communications for Mrs. Clinton's campaign committee, Friends of Hillary. "Help us show the right wing that we will be ready and able to fight back."...
>
> That said, the fund-raising solicitation exposes a side of Mrs. Clinton—fiery partisan—that she has rarely displayed in the four years since she arrived in the Senate, where she has won over many Republican colleagues with a nonconfrontational and even cordial style.
>
> In an interview, Ms. Lewis said the e-mail message was largely sent in response to published reports that Republicans are creating a political action committee seeking to raise $10 million to run a campaign against Mrs. Clinton in 2006.

Hillary is doing yeoman's work, in my mind, repositioning both herself and the party on issues like abortion and national security. (Actually, only some of it is repositioning—i.e., changing substance. Some of it is simple reframing—i.e., changing rhetoric.) But she's always going to have this huge sucker-punchability problem. That is, the right can always launch a nasty smear campaign against her, which then gets the backs up of people on the left, who rush to her defense (with or without prodding from Hillary's fund-raising staff), further undercutting her carefully crafted image as a moderate. I'm just not sure how she avoids this.

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## On the Hill

# The Day After

BY MICHAEL CROWLEY

NOT SINCE THE Cuban missile crisis has Washington been so braced for the possibility of nuclear war. But this time, the nukes are figurative: Everyone is waiting to see whether Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist can muster the 51 votes he needs to trigger the so-called "nuclear option" and change the Senate's rules to prevent Democrats from filibustering judicial nominees.

But, even as reporters buttonhole every fence-sitting Republican to parse their latest thoughts about the nuclear option, few people are talking about what would follow Frist's mushroom cloud. Call it nuclear winter: the scenario in which Democrats retaliate by exploiting Senate procedures to plunge the institution into chaos and prevent anything from getting accomplished. Think *Mad Max Goes to Washington*. "We will deny Republicans the bipartisan cooperation that allows the Senate to function effectively," says Jim Manley, spokesman for Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid. Translation: You want to rename a post office? Better allow a couple days for it. As People for the American Way President Ralph Neas, a key organizer of liberal resistance to the nuclear option, puts it, "Detonating a nuclear weapon will have nuclear fallout."

This is classic deterrence theory at work. Democrats are talking about political Armageddon in the hope that Republicans will chicken out. Unfortunately, it's easier for Democrats to threaten dire consequences than it would be to enact them. Because, while Democrats feel they are morally justified in shutting down the Senate, some are concluding that, as political a matter, the strategy is too radioactive to handle.

DEMOCRATS CERTAINLY HAVE the power to shut down the Senate. Virtually all of the chamber's business is conducted with the "unanimous consent" of all 100 senators. Usually that's a formality. But a senator always has the power to stand up and raise a procedural objection that requires a majority vote to dismiss. Senators rarely exercise such power because it infuriates their colleagues and, if everyone did it, nothing would ever get done. Reid and company could start raising nonstop objections, however—forcing multiple votes on, say, a resolution congratulating the national champion University of North Carolina basketball team. Frist would have to keep 51 friendly senators near the Senate floor to accomplish anything, which is about as easy as keeping dozens of grasshoppers in an uncovered box. The Senate rarely operates smoothly. But, in a nuclear winter, it would be about as efficient as your average Department of Motor Vehicles—and about as pleasant.

A few weeks ago, it sounded like Democrats were ready to implement this scorched-earth strategy. In mid-March, Reid sent Frist a letter warning that, "[S]hould the majority choose to break the rules ... the majority should not expect to receive cooperation from the minority in the conduct of Senate business." The letter was accompanied by a defiant rally of Senate Democrats on the Capitol steps. Republican senators—and the press—treated Reid's letter as a pledge to burn down the Senate. "SENATE WORK MAY COME TO HALT IF GOP BARS JUDICIAL FILIBUSTERS," *The Washington Post* reported. Iowa Republican Senator Charles Grassley told *The Hill* that, if Democrats were going to render the Senate inoperable, Republicans might as well pack up and leave town.

The specter of a shutdown certainly pleased the pugilistic liberal left. But it seems to have spooked Senate Democrats, who now emphasize all the things they *don't* intend to block, like bills dealing with national security or "critical government services." Where their tone was once bellicose, Democratic staffers are now circumspect. The initial response "was a little too overblown," says Manley. "There never was an intention to shut down the government." But other Democrats say it's clear that some nervous backtracking is underway. Says one aide to a Senate Judiciary Committee member: "They did a showdown press conference and got showdown headlines, and then said, 'Oh my God, what just happened?' Well, what do you expect?"

Why the skittishness? Perhaps because Republicans like Grassley quickly offered a shrewd response: that Democrats were threatening to "shut down the government," a phrase that evokes the disastrous budget showdown the Gingrich Republicans forced with the Clinton White House in 1995. Gingrich's game of budget chicken led to the shutdown of national parks and museums and inflicted serious political damage on the GOP. Democrats insist they would never let things reach that point—that they will pick their battles carefully and will not stop essential budget appropriations bills. "We've learned lessons from 1995," says Manley.

But it's the budget that consumes most of Congress's time. So what *are* the Democrats willing to hold up? There aren't many good targets. Republicans have already passed major class-action and bankruptcy reform bills—a source of grumbling among some Democrats who feel like Reid, who did not fight those bills all-out, should have done more to leverage them against the nuclear option. "Now that the Republicans have gotten all their agenda items through, they can afford to piss off their business backers" who are always trying to pass pet provisions, says one Democratic strategist. Meanwhile, some Democrats complain that Reid's promised exception for "national security" legislation was a blunder. "From a tactical perspective, Reid made a mistake," adds the strategist. "He created a litmus test for national security. Well, suddenly everything becomes vital to our national security." And, with the apparent demise of Bush's Social Security plan, there aren't many other major

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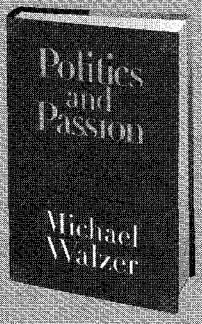
# "Brilliant,"[1] "original,"[2] "well-written"[3]

## POLITICS AND PASSION

*Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism*

Michael Walzer

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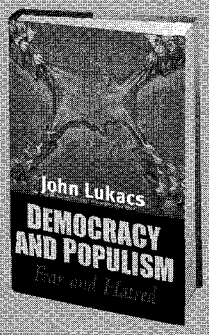
## DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM

*Fear and Hatred*

John Lukacs

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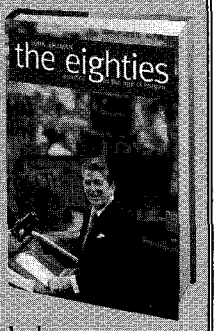
## THE EIGHTIES

*America in the Age of Reagan*

John Ehrman

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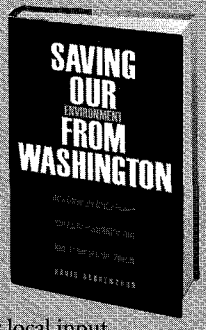
## SAVING OUR ENVIRONMENT FROM WASHINGTON

*How Congress Grabs Power, Shirks Responsibility, and Shortchanges the People*

David Schoenbrod

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*A New History*

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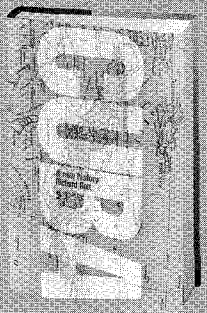

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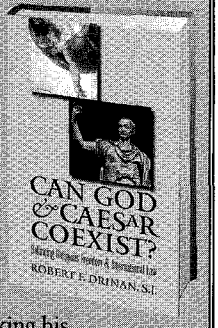
## CAN GOD AND CAESAR COEXIST?

*Balancing Religious Freedom and International Law*

Robert F. Drinan, S.J.

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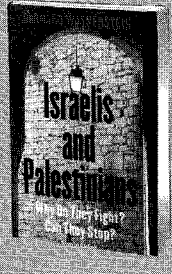
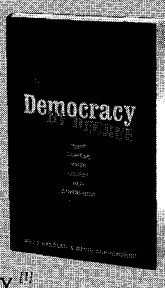



"Readers who care about the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict should not overlook Bernard Wasserstein's lucid attempt to look at it from some unusual angles. . . . **A helpful and original introduction to the conflict.**" —Warren Bass, *Washington Post Book World* [4]

## DEMOCRACY BY DECREE

*What Happens When Courts Run Government*

Ross Sandler and David Schoenbrod

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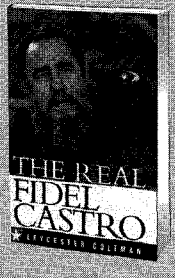
## THE REAL FIDEL CASTRO

Leycester Coltman

With a Foreword by Julia E. Sweig




**"This balanced view of Castro . . . [is] very well-written and easily read."**
—Anthony Daniels, *Sunday Telegraph* [5]

**"Superb."**
—Austen Ivereigh, *Tablet*

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Republican agenda items left.

Even a pork bonanza like the $284 billion highway spending bill would seem to pose too many hazards for obstruction-inclined Democrats. "Do they really want to go back to their states and say, 'Yeah, I know you're not getting the road funding that you wanted, and it's all because of a judge'?" asks an aide to one leading pro-nuke Republican senator. "I don't see it." Neither, it seems, do some conservative Democrats. For instance, according to David DiMartino, a spokesman for Democratic Senator Ben Nelson, who faces a potentially tough reelection in bright-red Nebraska next year, Nelson is "concerned" about the prospect of a gummed-up Senate because "we have so many important bills that have not been passed. All these things that are so important to Nebraska, like the highway bill, the energy bill, corn subsidies. These are things he really wants to get done this year. I don't think he's looking forward to that kind of atmosphere."

Even if Democrats undertook a shutdown (or slowdown) strategy, it's not clear how long they would feel bound to enforce it. "That's the big question nobody has asked," says the GOP aide. "If they say a month, well, who gives a shit? And if it's until the end of [2006], it's ridiculous and untenable."

MEANWHILE, SOME DEMOCRATS are now pushing for strategies that look less like obstructionism—a word that makes them jittery after last year's defeat of former Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle. (The role the GOP's "obstructionist" label played in Daschle's loss has been exaggerated, but that doesn't mean many Democrats want to chance it.) A potentially more promising post-nuclear strategy for Democrats may be to hijack the Senate agenda rather than paralyze it. (Senate rules actually allow the minority more power to bring up bills than most people realize, but collegial norms mean it almost never happens.) "It would be great to have eight to ten bills we could do over and over again and just sort of drill the Democratic agenda into the public's head," says an aide to one Senate Judiciary Committee Democrat. "Every time they bring up a corporate relief bill, we'd bring up a minimum wage bill. Every time they bring up a bankruptcy bill, we'd bring up a health care bill. I think that's a better strategy than objecting every five seconds and adjourning every five seconds."

Of course, even some of the Democrats crafting these alternative plans view them much as Americans once viewed their basement fallout shelters: something they hope they'll never use. And, while Frist has made some gains of late—such as winning over Kentucky Republican Mitch McConnell, a respected GOP elder who had been a key holdout—there remain enough Republican moderates and traditionalists with doubts about the nuclear option that a showdown does not yet appear imminent. That's good news for Democrats. Given their uncertainty about how to deal with a post-nuclear Senate, an increasing number are desperately hoping that Frist's bomb never detonates. ■

# Wolfowitz, World Banker. Loan Ranger

BY SEBASTIAN MALLABY

ELEVEN YEARS AGO, when the World Bank celebrated its fiftieth birthday, it was not entirely clear that it would survive until its sixtieth. Huge crowds assembled under the slogan FIFTY YEARS IS ENOUGH, and the Bank's meetings in Madrid descended into chaos. A group dressed in rough blankets blocked the entrance to the conference site, proclaiming that their clothing signaled solidarity with indigenous peoples uprooted by the Bank's projects. And, when the Bank's president rose to deliver his keynote address, fake dollar bills began to tumble on the audience. WORLD BANKENSTEIN was the inscription on one of the notes. THIS NOTE IS REDEEMABLE FOR OZONE DESTRUCTION, read another.

But the Bank has done more than merely survive. Over the course of the past decade, it has proved its continuing relevance. The United States and its allies have used the Bank to lead the reconstruction of Bosnia, East Timor, Kosovo, and, to some extent, Afghanistan; the Bank provided bail-out funds during the emerging-market crisis of 1997–1998; it has helped shore up weak and failing states; and it has generally spearheaded the rich world's efforts to combat poverty. Its 10,000 employees continue to form the brightest concentration of development experts anywhere; they pump out around $20 billion in loans and grants each year and run projects in almost 100 countries. Its economic research is first-class and its projects have a decent success rate, considering their ambition and the challenge of operating in the developing world.

The Bank weathered the anti-globalization protests of 1999–2000 and is now enjoying a rare moment of popular support. People seem to understand that poor countries are harmed not by trade but by wealthy nations' trade *barriers*; the public debate is influenced less by anti-globalization campaigners and more by pro-trade figures like Bono.

Which is one reason the recent appointment of Paul Wolfowitz to head the Bank has drawn such groans from both inside and outside the institution. Some fear Wolfowitz's presidency will once again put the Bank in the crosshairs of the radical left. Others worry his role in the unpopular Iraq war will make it hard for him to win support for the Bank's policies among both donor governments and client states. In reality, there is much to recommend Wolfowitz. His lifelong support for the spread of democracy

*Sebastian Mallaby is a* WASHINGTON POST *columnist and author of* THE WORLD'S BANKER: A STORY OF FAILED STATES, FINANCIAL CRISES, AND THE WEALTH AND POVERTY OF NATIONS.

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jibes with what many now see as one of the Bank's central missions. But, to be successful, Wolfowitz will have to resist two forces that could push him off course: his own sometimes naïve idealism and his affiliation with certain strands of the Republican Party.

WOLFOWITZ GREW UP in a family marked by the Holocaust, and he despises dictators. He got his first chance to put this passion into action as a State Department official in the mid-'80s, when he played a key role in the diplomacy that ended the Marcos era in the Philippines. Later, as ambassador to Indonesia, he advocated Western aid for nongovernmental groups that opposed Suharto's autocracy. Then, in the early '90s, this time as a Pentagon official, Wolfowitz pushed NATO expansion as a tool to cement Eastern European democracy. In sum, his enthusiasm for pro-democracy regime change goes back a long way before September 11, 2001. Now this passion may combine in interesting ways with his new assignment.

Two decades ago, the World Bank was unsympathetic to democracy. Research suggested that democracy was inimical to development: In multi-country analyses, authoritarian governments seemed to reduce poverty faster, a finding that fitted with the idea that development was mainly about imposing tough economic prescriptions—kill inflation, close budget deficits, privatize state firms—more easily meted out by autocrats. But, starting in the '90s, the research consensus shifted. New multi-country analyses, notably by Adam Przeworski of New York University and Fernando Limongi of the University of São Paulo, who examined growth rates in 135 countries between 1950 and 1990, found no authoritarian advantage after all; meanwhile, the nature of the development challenge was reinterpreted. Tough economic prescriptions were now said to be only one part of the answer. The other was to fight corruption and establish the rule of law in order to attract private investment. This new emphasis on good governance cast democracy in a fresh light. To fight corruption, after all, democratic virtues—transparency, accountability, a free and lively press—are all but indispensable.

The World Bank has led this new development fashion, just as it previously led the field in dishing out economic austerity. Outgoing Bank President James Wolfensohn signaled the start of a new era when he denounced "the cancer of corruption" in 1996, shattering the understanding that such "political" issues were beyond the Bank's purview. Since then, the Bank has spoken out ever more loudly about governance and launched dozens of projects designed to improve it. It has developed state-of-the-art tools for diagnosing corruption—opinion surveys that capture people's perceptions of the problem, databases on how long it takes to set up a business, analyses of transparency in public budgets—and it has backed civil service reforms, judicial reforms, and media-training initiatives. And yet, as Wolfowitz arrives, there is much uncertainty within the Bank about where to take these efforts.

One argument revolves around the question of when to refuse aid to dictators. Some truly appalling characters make this an easy call—Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, for instance. But there are others who pose a trickier dilemma: They cling corruptly to power, and yet their policies are pro-development enough to allow Bank projects to alleviate poverty. In the '80s and early '90s, Indonesia's Suharto illustrated this problem: Corruption was rife, and yet poverty was falling quickly. Today, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni poses a similar question. In the '90s, Museveni's government cut Uganda's poverty rate by 40 percent. But now the strongman is rewriting the constitution in order to extend his grip on power beyond the 19 years he has already had.

The World Bank tends to debate these borderline cases with a studious zeal and then continue lending. Its organizational structure, which vests power in country directors whose job is to serve borrowing clients, creates few incentives to refuse money—the counterexamples, such as the freezing of Kenya's programs in the waning days of the administration of Daniel arap Moi, were always late in coming. And yet, the Bank's own research department has demonstrated that aid only tends to be effective in countries with good policies; so an organizational culture that gives borrowing clients the benefit of the doubt could be reformed. If Wolfowitz is guided by his pro-democracy instincts, and, if he rewards country directors who say no to determinedly undemocratic clients, he will bring the Bank's lending more closely in line with its research establishment.

ON ANOTHER QUESTION, however, Wolfowitz's instincts may not be so helpful. The Iraq invasion, and Wolfowitz's earlier conviction that Afghanistan could be reconstructed with just 5,000 peacekeepers, suggest an idealistic commitment to attractive ends that is not always anchored in reality. And yet the Bank's experience with governance projects over the past decade ought to teach humility; many of them have foundered. Even more than most development endeavors, governance projects are subject to an impossible catch-22: How do you get a corrupt government to reform itself? How do you administer a project to improve administration when the administration itself is the issue?

This circular problem has driven some World Bankers to despair. Bill Easterly, a former Bank economist now at New York University, has made his name arguing that externally driven reform is usually futile. The World Bank itself is about to publish a monumental analysis of the development lessons from the '90s, concluding that success tends to reflect the peculiar circumstances of individual countries—and thus the Bank has few general lessons to offer. Even if this pessimism is exaggerated, the record is clear. As the Bank's own governance department argued in a book on Africa last year, big-bang projects to improve government administration have generally failed. Success tends to be

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found in modest incrementalism.

The good news is that this incrementalism can be impressive. In Uganda, for example, the World Bank pioneered something called the public expenditure tracking survey: It figured out how much tax money was supposed to reach each school, then asked the schools what their actual receipts were. Two-thirds of the schools in the 1996 survey, the Bank discovered, received none of the intended cash. Reformers in Uganda's government then published notices in the newspapers detailing what each school was supposed to get, and the numbers were posted on school notice boards. Pretty soon, outraged parents realized what their children were missing and began to exert pressure on corrupt local officials. When the Bank repeated its survey four years later, the proportion of schools that were still getting none of the intended money had fallen from two-thirds to less than one-tenth.

So incrementalism need not mean defeatism. The Bank can be effective where it avoids excessive ambition, burrows into a country, and comes up with practical ideas that catalyze progress. The shift in outlook that's needed is best captured by a scientific metaphor. The old Bank had an engineer's mindset: It designed ideal systems on its drawing board, then went out and tried to build them. The new Bank, by contrast, needs to think like a doctor. The first step is to understand the human organism in all its complexity; the second is to prescribe an intervention that's subtle enough to stimulate the immune system without poisoning the patient. If Wolfowitz can shed his own engineering mindset, he may help the Bank to find its feet on governance.

REINVIGORATING THE BANK'S sense of mission is especially important because of the other big challenge that awaits Wolfowitz. The Bank, despite its robust appearance, is financially fragile. Wolfowitz will have to break with his own Republican Party if he is to address this problem.

The first part of this break concerns the Bank's subsidized loans, which go only to its poorest clients. Every three years, the Bank solicits contributions from donor governments to its soft loan kitty, then it lends the money at highly concessional terms—but still demands repayment. The advantage of this structure is that the Bank can offer more money than it could if it just made grants; roughly one-fifth of its soft loan resources come from repayment on old loans, and the proportion is expected to rise to half over the next 20 years, as China and other successful graduates from soft loan status pay back their old assistance. The ability to offer more new money gives the Bank important leverage. It can command the attention of government officials in developing countries. And it can dominate the committees of donors to many poor countries, allowing it to impose a measure of coordination on the infuriatingly duplicative aid business.

The Bush administration, however, dislikes the Bank's soft loans, for the understandable reason that poor countries have difficulty repaying them. It has pushed the Bank to convert some of these loans into grants. In a deal concluded earlier this year, the Bank agreed that grants will constitute 30 percent of its concessional aid over the next three years. On top of that, the Bush administration wants the Bank to forgive all past loans to an especially miserable subset of its poor clients. For the clients, this is naturally great news. But, for the Bank, it means forgoing future repayments. The combination of debt relief and grants would deprive the Bank's soft loan kitty of a large chunk of its future resources. Unless donors compensated the Bank by stumping up more cash, the Bank's operations in its poorest client countries would contract substantially. What's more, once some countries get debt relief, it will be hard to deny other supplicants. The cost of forgiveness to the Bank could snowball.

Wolfowitz could head off this threat. The Bush Treasury, which has pushed the anti-loan agenda, is notoriously weak; and John Taylor, the Stanford professor who championed aggressive debt relief, announced his departure from Treasury recently. Moreover, Great Britain's government has advanced a variation of debt relief that would be good for poor countries without hurting the Bank. Under the British proposal, rich countries would take over highly indebted countries' debt service payments, so the countries would get relief while the Bank would still get its money. By embracing the British idea, Wolfowitz could protect the soft loan kitty's long-term health—and demonstrate independence from Washington and openness to Europe.

The second issue on which Wolfowitz must break with Republican doctrine concerns the Bank's operations in richer developing countries. These borrowers—China, Brazil, South Africa, and so on—borrow at market rates rather than on subsidized terms; the Bank makes a small profit on each loan, which covers administrative expenses. A persistent strain in Republican thinking, led most visibly by Professor Allan Meltzer of Carnegie Mellon University, holds that the Bank should stop lending to the Brazils of this world. Such countries have access to private capital, the argument goes. Public sector lenders like the World Bank should get out on principle. But a financial institution that walks away from its most creditworthy clients is asking for trouble. If the World Bank had to do without the profits it makes lending to Brazil and other strong borrowers, its administrative budget would shrink, staff morale would dip, and quality would suffer.

If it cannot address these threats vigorously, the Bank will lose its current superiority over U.N. agencies. It will no longer be able to afford a staff of driven PhDs, and it will no longer dominate development practice and thinking. The world will then have lost one of its best tools for managing globalization, and an opportunity to turn the World Bank into an effective champion of good governance in the developing world will have been forfeited. Wolfowitz, of all people, must want to avoid that. ■

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# Thirty Attorneys General Speak Out On Pain Management!

## To: The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)
## From: The National Association of Attorneys General

January 19, 2005

We, the undersigned Attorneys General, write to express our concern about recent DEA actions with respect to prescription pain medication policy and to request a joint meeting with you...

The National Association of Attorneys General in 2003 adopted a Resolution Calling for a Balanced Approach to Promoting Pain Relief and Preventing Abuse of Pain Medications. Both these documents reflected a consensus among law enforcement agencies, health care practitioners, and patient advocates that the prevention of drug abuse is an important societal goal that can and should be pursued without hindering proper patient care. The [DEA Pain Guidelines] issued in 2004 appeared to be consistent with these principles, so we were surprised when they were withdrawn. The Interim Policy published on November 16, 2004 emphasizes enforcement, and seems likely to have a chilling effect on physicians engaged in the legitimate practice of medicine...

**We have learned that adequate pain management is often difficult to obtain because many physicians fear investigations and enforcement actions** if they prescribe adequate levels of opioids or have many patients with prescriptions for pain medications. We are working to address these concerns while ensuring that individuals who do divert or abuse drugs are prosecuted...

We hope that together we can find ways to prevent abuse and diversion without infringing on the legitimate practice of medicine or exerting a chilling effect on the willingness of physicians to treat patients who are in pain...We hope to meet with you soon.

Sincerely,

Attorneys General of:

Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia

**www.CommonSenseDrugPolicy.org, www.DrugWarFacts.org**

**Mike Gray, Chair; Robert Field, Co-Chair**

See the full letter at www.csdp.org/naagletter.htm

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An architectural triumph.

# Memory Palace

BY MARTIN PERETZ

IT WAS THE prophet Isaiah who gave Yad Vashem its name. "And to them will I give within my house and within my walls a memorial and ... an everlasting name"—which is precisely what the site of remembrance in Jerusalem for the six million victims of the Jewish catastrophe in Europe is trying to do. A name and a history for every one of those murdered by the Nazis and their numerous collaborators: the pious and the free-thinking; the wise and the dumb; the beautiful and the plain; scholars and shoemakers; seamstresses and skiers; serious folk and slackers; the poor and the rich and those in the middle; men, women, young children—at least one and a half million of the latter. No exceptions made, except by luck or the special bravery of the doomed. Yad Vashem was not the first monument in Jerusalem to the European hell: A terrifying cave of artifacts and plaques was established on Mount Zion a few years after the war. But it was Yad Vashem that introduced the combined ideal of a memorial and a name, of commemoration and scholarship. It was first imagined during World War II and formalized immediately after the war at an international Zionist conference held in London. The project was put into the hands of the National Council of the Jews of Palestine, the singularly democratic authority that had been preparing the Yishuv for sovereignty. It opened in 1957, the first such institution anywhere, on a richly forested hill overlooking the western outskirts of the city in the Jewish state that—had it been permitted by the great powers to exist 15 years earlier—would have systemically absorbed the stalked Jews of civilized Europe.

The original installation, heavily didactic and built almost entirely around photographs, had hardly any architecture. It felt like a bomb shelter, or a cave carved out of the earth. It did adjoin a handsome stone memorial hall, enclosing a stark floor map of Europe punctuated by the eternally horrifying names of death camps: Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek, and so on. An eternal light is all that illumines the macabre cartography. All of this still stands, as does the Avenue of the Righteous, sided by trees planted to honor some 18,000 gentiles—not all that many of them, when you think about it—who risked their lives to rescue Jews from Moloch. It is from this route of Christian heroes that visitors make their way to the shattering experience.

Now the Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie has built a new Yad Vashem on the same sacred site. Safdie had previously designed and set in place a memorial centered around an actual railroad car that ferried Jews from the ghettos to the *lager* (historians tell us that the train schedules were indispensable to the success of the Final Solution, a theme explained in the new exhibits) and a children's memorial centered on a single lit candle that, through mirror and magnification—and a recorded recitation of the known names of the perished—hauntingly conveys the magnitude of the disaster. But, in mid-March, he unveiled an amazing new structure, a space at once primordial and highly modern, to hold the terrible evidence that no one wanted to confront at the time—not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, not the pro-Zionist Winston Churchill, and not the non-Jewish Jews who owned *The New York Times*—that the Jewish people were being snuffed out. The 200-meter-long structure is a three-dimensional cement triangle, which burrows through the mountain revealing the building's beginning and its end, both of which are brilliantly cantilevered into space. Safdie's signature command of natural light—in this case, light from a narrow skylight running along the structure's apex cutting through the alp—illumines the entire dark journey, through the deep prism itself and the historical galleries undulating on the sides. You cannot skip one gallery for another, one part of the narrative for another. Safdie has cut angular trenches through his chronological passageway, and one of the first is filled with books—by Einstein, Freud, Werfel, Zweig, and the other Jewish degenerates—that the Nazis gathered for the burnings visible on the adjoining video screens. (It was not long before people were gathered for burnings.) And, at the end of the dark journey, you emerge in the clear sunlight on the Jerusalem hills. From five feet back, and ten, all you see is sky. And then you are quite literally free. You are over land, the land of Israel. But the voyage is always curtained by the concrete.

OVER THE LAND of Israel: There is a Zionist dimension to the exhibit at Yad Vashem, and it is altogether apposite. Middle-class liberalism in Europe demanded of the Jews that they assimilate, and, when they did, they were resented. Social democracy denied the Jews their peoplehood. Communism saw the Jews as enemies and even made an alliance with Adolf Hitler and then prepared its own onslaught against them. Religious Judaism (with some exceptions) instilled among Jews a debilitating passivism. Only the Zionists grasped that Europe was doomed soil for the Jewish people. A few European Jewish communities experienced an exodus during the 1930s, and almost all of those who went were Zionists. Thessaloniki is one instance. In 1935–36, 15,000 Salonician Jews emigrated to Palestine and built the port of Haifa. Some 50,000 Jews stayed behind, of whom fewer than 2,000 survived the war. This surely was among the highest "kill ratios" of the entire Holocaust.

The exhibit at Yad Vashem starts with an exquisite magic lantern video presentation of old footage—the home movies of the martyred—by Michal Rovner. Here you see those who were alive just before they would be dead. The footage moves from east to west, in a meshing of map and landscape, from right to left, as in a Torah scroll. I cannot get

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out of my mind the young girls beckoning the visitor into their lives with the gentle inward waving of their hands. I cannot forget their smiles. I bitterly note their astonishing diversity. This building may be the most moral statement made by architecture in our time. Its rendering of the life of the murdered is searing and subtle. You can almost wear their shoes, look through their eyeglasses, read their poems of despair. You almost feel what it was like trying to get bread in the Warsaw ghetto or being trapped in Budapest when the Germans, already almost completely vanquished, mobilized themselves for their last great massacre of Hungarian Jewry in Auschwitz. And then you come to a photograph of Heinrich Himmler, and you listen to a recording of a speech he made to SS officers in 1943:

> It is one of those things that is easily said. "The Jewish people is being exterminated," every party member will tell you. ... And then along they all come, all the 80 million upright Germans, and each one has his decent Jew. ... And none of them has seen it, has endured it. Most of you will know what it means when 100 bodies lie together, when there are 500, or when there are 1,000. And to have seen this through, and ... to have remained decent, has made us hard and is a page of glory never mentioned and never to be mentioned.

It was not just six million who perished. It was an entire culture that was put to death. Still, consider the raw numbers. At Yad Vashem, three million dead men, women, and children are individually recorded in the archives, some even with pictures. My mother, who came from a Polish village called Levertov, had six siblings, one of whom survived (he went east to Russia). His daughter and grandchildren now live in the United States, and a son and his family live in Israel. The five who perished were all married and had children, perhaps four or five each. My father, who came from the same shtetl, left eight brothers and sisters at home, and pleaded with them to come to the United States (which wasn't so easy) or go to Palestine. All of them were married with the usual number of children. Only one of these children, a daughter of one of my father's sisters, got out, taking the underground route to Palestine, running the blockade, and ending up on a kibbutz in what is now Israel. Still alive at 90, she has two children, five grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. So here is the disaster writ small: Had her 30- or 40-odd cousins lived, how many of the family line would still be alive? How many more Jews would be alive if the six million had not been slaughtered?

THERE WAS ONE discordant note in the opening ceremonies, and it was the participation of Kofi Annan. He had taken time out on his way to Jerusalem to pay homage at the Ramallah grave of Yasir Arafat, a certified legatee of the anti-Semitism of the Nazis. How diplomatic! The secretary-general's very presence evoked the offending memory of his predecessors: U Thant, who removed U.N. troops from the Sinai—a decade-old barrier to war between Israel and Egypt—on the command of Gamal Abdel Nasser, which unleashed the Six Day War; and, most grotesquely, Kurt Waldheim, whose personal role in the Final Solution to "the Jewish problem" was suppressed by the great powers and the U.N. bureaucracy. And what were Annan's qualifications for this ceremony? Well, he is an expert on genocide, an expert of a certain sort. In his diplomatic practice of the 1990s, in various U.N. posts, he became a genocide-denier, since he refused to act against the extermination wars in Bosnia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan. If the history of our time is written honestly, it will record that Annan stood passively by as the new exterminators went to work. Shame will be his memorial, his everlasting name. ■

## After Pope John Paul II.

# History Test

BY MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS

HAGIOGRAPHY IS ALWAYS a disservice to history and, as often as not, to the deceased as well. Pope John Paul II was born near Kraków, not Krypton, and he was at pains to demonstrate his humanity through his suffering these past few years. He was far more complex and interesting than the accolades would have you believe. Columnist George F. Will lumped John Paul with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as a champion of human freedom, establishing a new, conservative Trinity but reducing John Paul to his political significance. John Paul's biographer, George Weigel, declared him the man of the century and has been talking endlessly about the Pope's legacy. (Of course, if I had a 1,000-page biography of John Paul in print, I might be fixated on his legacy also.)

But biographers do not get to decide John Paul's legacy. The next Pope does. The Italians have a saying: There is no one as dead as a dead Pope. The next Pope may take up John Paul's writings or ignore them as he sees fit. After a 32-year reign ending in 1878, Pope Pius IX was succeeded by Leo XIII, who completely ignored most of Pius's policies. When Leo died in 1903, the cardinals elected Pius X, who in turn ignored Leo's policies. John Paul decided to confront modernity, but future Popes may choose not to continue that fight. All we can say now is that, in his battle with the present, John Paul sometimes won, but often he lost.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS of Karol Wojtyla's early life are a catalogue of loss. He was nearly nine years old when his mother died, twelve when his only brother died, and 20 when his

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father died. Each loss hastened Wojtyla's thoughts beyond the horizon of human cognition to the traditional Catholicism of his upbringing. Perhaps it is death's absoluteness—the finality of the separation from the world—that convinces a young man the world has no answers to life's greatest enigma. Thus, in place of his late mother, his devotion to the Virgin Mary became more pronounced; his prayerful interiority opened up a world in which loss was gain, death was life, and the Church was seen as—in the title of one of his books—a sign of contradiction.

The Germans overran Poland in 1939, closing Jagiellonian University—where Wojtyla was studying—and depriving him of yet another love in his life. In the face of Nazi aggression, the future Pope's nationalism took a traditional Polish form of expression: priesthood. And, because the Church's history in Poland has been different from its history in the West, his Catholicism was different, too. As the bearer of Polish national culture at times when there was no Polish state, the Church provided Wojtyla's generation of Polish Catholics with a certain sense of historical superiority, a confidence in their long-term ability to outlast Communism. Part of this confidence stemmed from the link to Rome; whereas Communist regimes suppressed national Orthodox churches throughout the Eastern bloc, the regime in Poland (and in Moscow) knew that tackling Catholicism in Poland would be more difficult. And that confidence allowed the Church to serve as a locus for opposition to the regime.

That opposition had an interesting side effect: The overt hostility between Church and state drew sharp lines between the sacred and the secular. Poland thus escaped the gradual secularization of mainstream religion that has proceeded in the West, the reduction of religion to ethics and the Church to an ethical authority. The spiritual, the unseen, the hidden—these were not stripped away from the religion of the Poles. The transient, the earthly, the mundane—these things were not unimportant (the Church strove hard for the right to build new churches and larger seminaries), but they were all in the service of that God who had, early in life, taught Wojtyla to find life in death and gain in loss.

THEOLOGICALLY, A FUNNY thing happened during John Paul's tenure that mirrored his own intellectual developments: "Supernatural" again became a noun. Eschewing the traditional Thomistic distinction between the supernatural ("grace") and the natural—and subsequent development of a "natural law" theology—some twentieth-century scholars returned to the writings of the fathers of the Church. These Christian writers of the Church's first five centuries had discoursed on the key beliefs of the faith: the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, the role of Mary. These issues were no longer in dispute, but, in returning to the sources, theologians began to see that something had been lost—that the focus of the Church had for too long been turned away from these core, animating beliefs about the supernatural.

The French theologian Henri de Lubac, whose 1938 book, *Catholicism*, pulled together quotations from the fathers of the Church, proposed a less rational, more Christ-centered theology. For his efforts, de Lubac was silenced by Pope Pius XII in the 1950s and forced to give up teaching (though he was rehabilitated by the time of the Second Vatican Council, in which he played a significant role as a theological adviser). Many Vatican II texts bear his imprint, but none is more important than Paragraph 22 of *Gaudium et Spes*, which was an almost verbatim quotation of de Lubac's condemned work. The key claim reads: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light." This core theological belief that philosophic anthropology must be based on the person of Christ has appeared in all of John Paul's public writings. His tireless insistence on the dignity of every human person is rooted here, in the belief that, because Christ became a man, every man must be loved like Christ.

It is difficult to overstate the theological importance of the grace-versus-nature debate—an argument akin to that between the Federalists and the anti-Federalists on the creation of a powerful central government. That is to say, depending on how you resolve this one issue, every other theological issue is affected, altered, colored, changed. Precisely because of the radical challenge de Lubac's thought represents, implementing it has been slow going, even for a man as forceful as John Paul. Patterns of interreligious dialogue, moral reasoning, and even core notions of what it means to be a Christian priest or a spouse are affected. This theological experiment is still in a very early stage, and conservative opposition to it has been effective. Much work remains to be done in applying de Lubac to moral theology. Because "natural law" theory has been the basis of Catholic moral teaching for several centuries, and because de Lubac's thought throws the whole idea of a "natural law" distinct from notions of grace into question, it is obvious just how experimental this theological experiment is. The previous legalism may have been dry and not specifically Christian, but it had this advantage: You can dispense from a law, but not from a truth.

What is clear about the de Lubacian agenda, carried forward by Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, is that it issues in a radicalized sense of Catholicism. This theological radicalism was at the heart of the "new evangelization" John Paul called for, an evangelization aimed at the secularized religion of the West but even more at the Third World. This was not a call to a "culture war" in the vulgar manner of contemporary right-wing U.S. politics, but it was clearly a call to a Catholic cultural renaissance. The de Lubacians see modernity's paradigms collapsing, and they seek to provide the theological soil from which a different, more mystical, and more Christocentric culture may be born. John Paul's embrace of a more Christ-centered theology is exciting and accounts for some of the dynamism of Catholicism in the

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Third World. But there have been costs. For example, the parameters of interreligious dialogue are more constricted when you posit that creation itself is ordered to Christ.

FOR ALL OF his theological innovativeness, John Paul was inattentive to, or complicit with, the most disconcerting political trend within Catholicism: the concentration of power in the Vatican. The Vatican is, today, more powerful within the universal Church than at any time in history. The popular image of the all-powerful medieval Pope is quite wrong; only in this century did Rome acquire the authority to appoint bishops throughout the world. Previously, governments or local hierarchies had the right to nominate candidates whom Rome could confirm or reject, but Rome could not simply thrust a chosen prelate onto an Episcopal throne.

Similarly, theological disputes within Catholicism used to be farmed out to the theological faculties of the universities in Bologna or Paris for resolution, and the authorities in Rome were called in only to apply disciplinary measures as needed. When those theological faculties were closed by revolutionary regimes at the end of the eighteenth century, theological disputes were sent to Rome as a matter of course, and the pattern has continued. Thus, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), a Vatican office, is judge and jury and litigant in theological disputes, and a bureaucratic method has subsumed an academic method in the making of theology. The head of the CDF, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, has become a sort of "official theologian" for the Church, a novel and problematic development. "The chair of Peter is many things," notes a French Church historian, "but it is not a faculty chair."

These trends have been further compounded by technological advances: Previously, a Pope would issue an encyclical letter to the bishops in Latin, which the local bishops would read. They would then issue their own pastoral letters in the vernacular to their flocks, highlighting some of the Pope's themes and not others, tailoring the papal directives to local context. Now, if the Pope says something, it appears the next day on the front page of *The New York Times*—a technological fact that, combined with John Paul's cult of personality, has made for an impoverished ecclesiology. Being Catholic means a whole lot more than agreeing with everything a Pope says. Theologians worried about dotting every I and crossing every T—so as to be in accord with the latest statement from Rome—are unlikely to be imaginative thinkers, such as de Lubac. Under John Paul, the Vatican only disciplined a few theologians, but the very public nature of the discipline has stifled countless others and made cautiousness the norm.

IN HIS LAST days, John Paul's voice failed him, but his influence on social issues had long since diminished. While the Iron Curtain still stood, his views on human rights and his often-voiced repugnance at the artificial political division of Europe were welcomed and covered by the Western press, though too many have given him undue credit for bringing down Communism (credit John Paul never claimed for himself). His contribution to the defeat of Communism was intellectual and pastoral, and only derivatively political. But, since the Wall came down, no one in the West (or in the newly liberated East) has paid much attention to the pontiff. In a society debating how best to shirk governmental commitments made to the elderly while movie executives are paid upward of $100 million in severance, surely John Paul's humanism gets high marks for simple consistency.

That humanism, which once underpinned and shaped the Enlightenment values of Western societies, seems so utterly absent from the spread-eagle capitalism of the West today, in which the market is the sole vehicle for assigning worth and resources. If the good of concrete human persons is not the criterion for social, political, and economic life; if the value of subjective freedom is so predominant as to trump all other values; if the moral life of the human person is consistently evaluated in utilitarian terms, is humanism still even possible? John Paul's consistent solidarity with the poor could not stand in sharper contrast to the predominant cultural ethos of the West.

Nowhere was the Pope's disappointment on social-justice issues more obvious than in his native Poland after the collapse of Communism. There, the very same people who had flocked to see the Pope on his pilgrimages, who had sustained Mass attendance records unparalleled in Europe, who had produced the greatest share of Europe's priests—those same people ignored the Church's teachings on birth control, divorced in record numbers, and, given the chance, flocked to purchase CDs and BMWs and cell phones. The disheartened pontiff turned his gaze from Eastern Europe to the impoverished southern part of the globe, trying to stem the tide of Western materialism and utilitarianism. John Paul's numerous visits to the Third World were attempts to demonstrate the Church's solidarity with and presence among the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It is on these continents that the Church is now looking for its springtime.

Indeed, Catholicism is becoming a Third World religion, and the structures and priorities of the Church will have to change even more than they did under Pope John Paul to accommodate this basic shift. In Africa and Asia and Latin America, the Gospel—with its call for solidarity with the poor and the suffering and for understanding the Church as a community of solidarity between God and man—has a different ring from Western Catholics' call for sexual liberation: It is the ring of authenticity. For all of its traditionalism, there is a whiff of newness in the Church today, a newness that was emphasized again and again in the writings and policies of Pope John Paul II. He was fascinated by the approach of the Third Millennium and wanted desperately to live long enough to usher it in, believing that it would herald a new day for the Church, a Church he tried to reawaken to its radical vision of God and the dignity of the human person. ■

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# After Pope John Paul II. Central America

BY JOHN T. MCGREEVY

LAST SPRING, TWO prominent Americans met with an ailing Pope John Paul II in Rome. President Bush's visit sparked massive protests and earned him both a public scolding from the Pope for the U.S. invasion of Iraq and thanks for his leadership on abortion. A second visitor, arriving a few days earlier, was less conspicuous, but no less significant. Chicago's Cardinal Francis George came to Rome for a routine Vatican meeting and used the occasion to tell the Pope about the plight of the American Church. In the United States, Cardinal George said, "the Gospel's call to receive freedom as a gift from God and to live its demands faithfully is regarded as oppressive, and the Church, which voices those demands publicly, is seen as an enemy of personal freedom and a cause of social violence." With a press that "fundamentally distorts Catholicism and any institution regarded as 'foreign' to the secular individualist ethos," he continued, "[o]ur freedom to preach the Gospel is diminished."

It was a bleak pronouncement, especially coming from George—the most influential and intellectually sophisticated of the American cardinals. And, even though it was delivered ten months before John Paul II's death, it suggests some of the challenges that his successor will face. Because, while the next Pope will undoubtedly have to wrestle with many other issues—such as confrontation and dialogue with Islam and the future of increasingly Catholic Africa—addressing the plight of the American Church will occupy an important place on his to-do list. Even with its troubles, the Catholic Church in the United States remains more vibrant than many of its counterparts in Europe and Latin America, with thousands of active parishes, the nation's most extensive social service network, and the world's largest private educational and medical systems. Its health remains vital to the health of world Catholicism.

THE PRIMARY TASK for the next Pope and the next generation of American Catholic leaders will be to manage the transition from a Catholic culture to a Catholic creed. Until the 1960s, the faith inherited by American Catholics came from an extraordinarily dense network of Catholic families, schools, parishes, and Catholic associations. This Catholic faith was not an assent to an abstract set of propositions. Instead, it was the result of a shared culture—one that allowed Catholics to recognize that they had been speaking "Catholic" all their lives.

To some extent, this Catholic culture still exists: There are 60 to 65 million Catholics in the United States, and two-thirds of them describe religion as "very important" or "important" in their lives. But these numbers mask a growing disengagement. The percentage of Catholic schoolchildren enrolled in Catholic schools is steadily declining, and after-school programs in religious education remain badly underdeveloped. At Notre Dame, where I teach and where almost all of my students are Catholic, professors in entry level classes cannot assume basic knowledge of the Bible, the sacraments, or Church history. Most Notre Dame students do voluntarily attend Mass, but nationally only slightly more than one-third of Catholics attend church once a week, down from two-thirds in 1965. The searing disillusionment generated by the sexual-abuse crisis has only deepened a more general alienation. Now, when Cardinal George and the more alert of the John Paul II bishops scan the American religious landscape, they worry that Catholicism will suffer the fate of mainline Protestantism edging toward cultural irrelevance or Reformed Judaism fearful of demographic extinction.

So far, the Vatican and the American bishops have tried to combat this threat with two strategies. The first has been to focus on evangelism. While most Catholics born before 1965 tend to think of personal statements of faith and mass rallies as, well, Protestant, American Catholic leaders have recently embraced these methods to provide a kind of Catholic creed or identity in the absence of the cultural supports young Catholics once took for granted. Pope John Paul II led this effort, with his ceaseless travels that brought him to the United States seven times, including to Denver in 1993 for one of the Church's massive World Youth Days conferences, which drew 500,000 young Catholics.

The second strategy has been to portray the Church as a counterweight to what George terms "the secular individualist" ethos of the United States. And, at times, this prophetic posture has yielded considerable fruits: John Paul's claim—in his 1998 encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*—that truth existed independent of social construction offered a much-needed challenge to fashionable academic relativism; and his relentless juxtaposition of a "culture of life" with a "culture of death" has clearly shifted the terms of debate on abortion and the death penalty. That Bush, in his tribute to John Paul II, sounded more like a Catholic bishop than a non-Catholic president, with references to his support for the "culture of life," reflects something more genuine than Karl Rove's ongoing effort to sway Catholic voters.

Too often, however, this second strategy has worked at cross-purposes with the first: As the American Church has tried to reach out to American Catholics, it has simultaneously alienated them by disdaining so much of the non-Catholic culture in which they are irrevocably immersed. Indeed, if the first strategy of evangelizing is to be successful, then the American Church will have to reconcile itself to certain aspects of American culture.

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Managing two problems that prevent this sort of reconciliation is crucial. The first is the intertwined knot of gender and ministry. Few women within the institutional Church structure hold decision-making power, and women working in parishes—increasingly important figures in a Church with a rapidly declining number of priests—struggle to obtain the opportunity to perform even basic ministerial tasks. This situation runs against one of the most powerful currents in modern history: the expansion of vocational opportunities for women. The real question is not the high-profile issue of women's ordination, but whether the next Pope will have the courage, unlike John Paul II, to sever some of the links between an ordained male clergy and ecclesiastical power. If not, what most educated Catholic women in the United States perceive as raw discrimination will have an inevitable multiplier effect, as they detach themselves from active participation in Church life, discourage their sons from entering the priesthood, and make the Church seem far more male in its authority structure than in the early '50s, when powerful, well-educated nuns ran many hospitals and schools.

The second problem is one of theological literacy. It is one thing for Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, John Paul's most important theological adviser, to meditate on the virtues of an all-male priesthood, since Ratzinger has forgotten more theology than most of his liberal critics ever knew. It's quite another to have young priests and bishops, educated in intellectually narrow seminaries and without serious immersion in either the Catholic tradition or the languages that constitute it, express grave doubts about female altar servers or Catholic Democrats who take Communion. Meanwhile, the self-declared Catholic "spokesmen" who took to the airwaves in recent weeks to pontificate on the Terri Schiavo case proved unable to give a compelling account of Catholic teaching on end-of-life issues—a teaching more complicated, contested, and rich than the blunt demand not to remove a single feeding tube. The contrast between the situation at the Second Vatican Council in the mid-'60s (when the elegant Latin and theological acumen of Americans like the Jesuit John Courtney Murray startled jaundiced Europeans) and the current moment (when some of the most visible "orthodox" American Catholics shuttle between pro-life protests and Mother Angelica's loopy Catholic cable network) could not be more stark.

THE STAKES IN all this are considerable. Given the moral dilemmas posed by contemporary bioethics, social welfare policy, and military strategy, Catholics might offer a distinctive alternative to the values of the market, an alternative that should be present in the public life of the world's only superpower. George is correct that this Catholic ethos is, in many ways, "foreign" to dominant American values, as is appropriate and perhaps inevitable for one of the world's most important global institutions. But its survival and effectiveness—both in the United States and around the world—will depend on a selective assimilation of American values as well. ■

## After Pope John Paul II.

# Look to Home

BY ANDREW NAGORSKI

ALMOST AS SOON as he was elected Pope in 1978, John Paul II expressed his wish to return to Poland for an official visit. Both the Communist rulers in Warsaw and the Kremlin were jittery about the possible impact of such an event, and they found themselves at odds about how to respond to the pontiff's request. Soviet party boss Leonid Brezhnev wanted to derail the visit altogether, warning his Polish counterpart, Edward Gierek, that it would "only cause trouble." "Tell the Pope—he's a wise man—he can declare publicly that he can't come due to illness," he suggested. When Gierek demurred, saying he had no choice but to allow the Pope to come, Brezhnev reluctantly backed off. "Well, do as you wish. But be careful you don't regret it later."

Brezhnev was never known as a brilliant tactician—or a brilliant anything, for that matter—but, in this particular case, his political instincts were right on target. The Pope made his famous triumphant procession through his homeland in June 1979, and—anything but coincidentally—the workers at the Gdańsk shipyard went on strike in August 1980, giving birth to the Solidarity free-trade union movement. The rest, as they say, is history.

While it's now generally accepted that the Pope was a major catalyst in the dizzying chain of events that led to the fall of Communism, the full scope of his activism during the crucial early period of his papacy isn't all that well-known or understood. Nor do many people outside Poland appreciate the complexity of his relationship with his homeland in the post–1989 era.

THE POPE'S COMMITMENT to religious freedom, and to freedom of conscience in the broader sense, was never limited to Poland. From the early days of his papacy, he also focused on Communist countries with far more repressive policies. In 1980, he convened the first official synod of the émigré bishops of the Ukrainian Uniate Church—an Eastern rite branch of the Church outlawed by Josef Stalin. He also quietly supported efforts to sustain an underground Ukrainian church. In the early '80s, I met a Polish priest who regularly risked arrest by traveling in civilian clothes to administer

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the sacraments there; the Pope was aware of his activities and those of others like him. The Pope was similarly committed to helping Catholics in the Baltic republics, especially in Lithuania, where religious activists churned out dissident pamphlets chronicling each new act of repression. In 1983, the Pope appointed Julijanus Vaivods of Latvia as the Soviet Union's first resident cardinal. And, that same year, he dedicated his pilgrimage to Lourdes to "all those who are suffering [religious] persecution." In short, his message was that the "silent churches" now had found a voice—*his* voice.

His determination to support the faithful was a direct result of his experiences in Poland. For he, too, had studied in an underground seminary—in his case, during the German occupation. As a priest in postwar Poland, his combination of pastoral gifts and penetrating intellect, along with his obvious popularity among the faithful, quickly brought him to the attention of his clerical superiors.

Karol Wojtyla also attracted the attention of the Communist authorities. At first, they badly misjudged him, believing that his focus on faith and culture, as opposed to any overtly political course, meant that he didn't represent a threat. Documents from the Polish secret police archives recently revealed that they were also misled by one of Wojtyla's fellow clerics—an informer named Wladyslaw Kulczycki, who turned in regular reports on the rising star of the Polish Church. Kulczycki, who wanted to climb the hierarchical ladder himself, was envious of Wojtyla's appointment as bishop and then archbishop of Kraków. His reports dismissed Wojtyla as a lightweight, but eventually the secret police realized that their informer's envy was skewing his judgment.

By then, however, Wojtyla was a force that couldn't be stopped. He waged a relentless campaign to construct a church in Nowa Huta, a town on the outskirts of Kraków that was supposed to be a model of socialism, with its giant steel mill—and, according to the planners, no places of worship. To that end, he mobilized volunteers who built the imposing Church of Our Lady Queen of Poland over the period of a decade, and their struggle became a rallying point for opposition to the regime.

The election of John Paul electrified Poles. If the seemingly impossible had happened and a Pole had been elevated to the papacy, then just maybe his countrymen weren't destined to be on the other side of the European divide, isolated and poor, forever. The Pope's message in 1979 and on subsequent visits was never to lose hope, not to be afraid, always to speak the truth. Coupled with his constant refrain about Europe's common spiritual genealogy, this amounted to an all-out assault on the division of the Continent. On hearing of the death of the man who eventually bested him, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the Polish party leader who imposed martial law and outlawed Solidarity, acknowledged the impact of that message: "The Pope was a detonator who liberated the spirit of the society," he said.

The Pope and his Church offered more than just words in the struggle against Jaruzelski's regime. During those dark days when Solidarity was driven underground, Polish churches often provided cover for activists to hold meetings, show videos—which were novelties then, and, most importantly, impossible to censor—and plan their next moves. On the Pope's next visit to Poland, in 1983, his Masses turned quickly into Solidarity rallies, with the mammoth crowds hoisting Solidarity banners and raising their fingers in the V-for-victory gesture.

THE POPE WAS delighted by the seismic changes of 1989, but his first trip back to Poland in the new post-Communist era was not simply a victory lap. He let Poles know in 1991 that he was disappointed that they hadn't yet rejected the abortion-on-demand policies of the old regime, and he warned against "an easy and mechanistic copying" of Western hedonistic values. In effect, he was saying that liberation from Communism shouldn't mean an abandonment of the spiritual values that fueled much of the resistance. "Understand, all you who are careless in these matters, understand that you cannot fail to concern me and cannot fail to hurt me," he told a rain-soaked crowd at a Mass in Kielce.

For Poles who were rushing to embrace consumerism and everything else that was seen as Western, this was a rude wake-up call. On its November 1991 cover, the Polish Catholic intellectual monthly *Znak* asked the question: "HAVE WE FAILED THE POPE?" To a certain extent, the answer was yes. Nonetheless, church attendance is still impressive, particularly when compared with the largely empty pews in Western Europe. And the influx of young men into seminaries during the '80s—due to the high moral prestige of the Church in that embattled era and the presence of a Polish Pope—has meant that Poland hasn't experienced anything like the crisis in vocations in the West. But, in the long run, the Church in Poland will inevitably lose ground to some of the same competing forces and modern secular temptations as Churches have in other countries.

Perhaps the greatest countervailing force to this trend will be the memory of the Polish Pope and what he did for his country and the world. And this, of course, always comes back to his inspirational role for the Solidarity movement. Characteristically, he never wanted to dwell on that and wasn't comfortable when others did so in his presence. Shortly before his death a few years ago, Jozef Tischner, the Kraków theologian-priest who was a good friend of Wojtyla's, recalled an evening they spent together in August 1980. Over dinner in the papal quarters, they watched Italian television reporting on the strikes in Gdańsk. The TV camera showed the crowd of striking workers and the shipyard's gate covered with flowers. Then, among the flowers, it zoomed in on a portrait of John Paul II, another potent symbol. At that moment, Tischner said, the Pope seemed to shrink into himself and didn't say a word. But the image had said it all. ■

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## After Pope John Paul II.

# Papal Paradox

BY E.J. DIONNE JR.

DO YOU THINK of Pope John Paul II as the man who condemned "luxurious egoism" and "imperialistic monopoly"? Do you remember him as the friend of workers who asserted "the priority of labor over capital"? Do you honor him as the first Pope who visited a synagogue, who told Catholics to embrace Jews as "our elder brothers," and who condemned anti-Semitism "at any time and by anyone"? Do you regard him as the hero of human rights who helped bring down Communist dictatorships and battled the death penalty?

Or do you think of John Paul as the man who presided over the condemnation of theologians who questioned the Church's teachings (on birth control) or preached liberation theology? Do you see him as intransigent in refusing to allow questioning of the all-male celibate priesthood? Do you note the extent to which he has transformed the Church by appointing conservative bishops and by naming a College of Cardinals likely to keep Catholicism on a traditionalist path?

"A sign of contradiction" was a favorite John Paul phrase, and it might be said to define his papacy. In his effect on Roman Catholicism's relationship to the world, his achievement will be judged as liberal. But his impact on the Church he leads has to be seen as conservative. These terms are vexed, and John Paul himself would probably reject them—he'd insist on his own consistency in opposing both the Marxist and capitalist forms of materialism, in arguing that the spiritual is always primary, and in asserting that the Church's central obligation is to doctrinal clarity. But the Pope's version of consistency does not necessarily match that of the world that is judging him. That's the paradox at the heart of his papacy.

TAKE FIRST JOHN PAUL'S approach to the outside world. Before the Second Vatican Council and the papacy of John XXIII, the Church decried modernity and liberalism, which many in the Church leadership condemned simply as "a sin." As Peter Steinfels has noted, Pope Pius IX used the terms "pernicious," "perfidious," "perverse," and "a virus," to refer to liberal Catholicism. The pre–Vatican II Church, especially in the 1930s, was inclined toward support of authoritarian governments and worried that embracing religious liberty meant tolerating "error."

Vatican II changed that, marking a truce with the modern world and, for many Catholics, an opportunity to embrace it. The Church sided with religious tolerance, democracy, and human rights. It was a stance at once moral and practical. Moral for the obvious reasons. Practical because the Church was beginning to grow in parts of the world where it found itself in the minority, and being in the minority teaches the importance of minority rights.

Moreover, John XXIII believed profoundly in taking the world as he found it—which meant grappling creatively with modernity. "Distrustful souls," he wrote in December 1961, "see only darkness burdening the face of the earth. We prefer instead to reaffirm all our confidence in our Savior who has not abandoned the world which he redeemed. Indeed, we make our own the recommendation of Jesus that we learn to distinguish 'the signs of the times,' and we seem to see now in the midst of so much darkness more than a few indications that augur well for the fate of the church and of humanity." As Reverend Joseph A. Komonchak, the premier historian of the Council, noted in *Commonweal*, "The conviction that God was still present and active in the world, as in the church, lay behind his frequent remark that the church is not a museum of antiques but a living garden of life."

John Paul confirmed the historic shift that John initiated and Pope Paul VI sustained. Precisely because John Paul is seen as a conservative, his acceptance of these changes almost certainly makes them irreversible. One can make a strong case that, 100 years from now, John Paul's most remembered achievements will be the "liberal" ones. He insisted upon the dignity of every human person and thereby campaigned for human rights, for social justice, and for the rights of workers and the poor. At Yad Vashem, he apologized for "the hatred, acts of persecution, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews by Christians." There was some debate over whether he said enough. For Jews and Catholics of a certain age, what he said was a breathtaking relief.

And his experiences reaffirmed, as the Second Vatican Council and John had understood, that religious tolerance had practical benefits for a Church taking root in the world's non-Christian regions. His visit to India in 1986 was a striking lesson in the importance of religious liberty to the future of the Church. Walls in Madras carried anti-Christian graffiti, including: GO WITH CHRIST. GO GET CRUCIFIED. No wonder John Paul praised the "precious principle" of the Indian constitution, which "specifically includes the right 'to profess, practice, and propagate religion.' "

John Paul lived in dynamic tension with modernity. That is different from outright opposition. And he was obviously skilled at adapting a 2,000-year-old Church to the realities of the times. He realized that a centralized papacy provided him with a platform no other religious leader could claim. The Pope may have no divisions, as Josef Stalin once

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sneered, but boy, could he command media attention.

But his attitude toward modernity was not just about method. One of his most important encyclicals was *Centesimus Annus*, issued 100 years after Leo XIII's great social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. *Centesimus* has to rank as one of the most successful papal documents in history. Rather than present a single line that Catholics should pursue in the area of politics and economics, it set the terms of debate among people of goodwill. John Paul ruled out dictatorships and highly centralized command economies. He also opposed capitalism without social safety nets and safeguards. But he left open a broad area for debate and experimentation. The Pope's approach was principled but not ideological. He was certainly egalitarian, but he did not demand absolute equality. He was open to the advantages of markets and to the positive uses of government. You could be on the right, as long as you acknowledged the imperative of lifting up the poor. You could be on the left, as long as you acknowledged the limits of the state and the right of individuals to personal initiative.

The highest compliment to the document lay not in the fact that so many were eager to say they agreed with the Pope, but that partisans of so many different viewpoints in the Church insisted that the Pope had agreed with them. Ardent supporters of free markets, such as Michael Novak, the conservative philosopher, saw the document as vindication and a breakthrough for a Church that had often expressed a deep skepticism of capitalism. Supporters of social reform and social democracy emphasized the document's insistence on government's responsibility to relieve poverty and guarantee workers' rights. In some sense, both sides were right. As Father J. Bryan Hehir has said, the Pope's assessment "takes the market reality seriously and acknowledges values in it that John Paul's predecessors may have assumed but did not assert." Yet the Pope also saw the market's moral limits. As Hehir put it, the Pope argued that "many human needs are not met by the workings of the market," that "there are whole groups of people without the resources to enter the market," and that "there are goods that cannot and must not be bought and sold." In his most important document on the political economy, John Paul proposed not dogma but debate. He laid out guidelines and boundaries, not anathemas.

If John Paul's story stopped here, his papacy would be about the triumph of liberal Catholicism. But that is not how we understand it, because, if so much of what the Pope did in relation to the world outside the Church was progressive, so much of what he did inside it was conservative. His was a centralizing papacy, a papacy that insisted upon a strict—his critics would say narrow—view of orthodoxy. John Paul closed off debate on the nature of the priesthood, refusing discussion of expanding its ranks to women and noncelibate men despite the great shortage of priests. In a Church that had relied on the work of nuns, many middle-class, educated women—especially in the United States—went into rebellion. He cracked down hard on dissent, dealing blows to what conservatives might call the North American heresy (about sex and birth control) and the South American heresy (about Marxism).

This did not go down well with theologians who insisted there was nothing heretical about their convictions. The Reverend Charles Curran, a well-liked, respected (and tenured) professor of moral theology at Catholic University, was condemned in the mid-'80s and told to leave the faculty for his critique of the Church's stance on—among other things—birth control. Liberal Catholic academics feared the threat to academic freedom. His home bishop backed him, too. "If Father Curran's status as a Roman Catholic theologian is brought into question," said Bishop Matthew Clark of Rochester, "I fear a serious setback to Catholic education and pastoral life in this country."

The Vatican condemned liberation theology, which emphasized Christians' obligation to shake up or overthrow unjust social structures. It was understandable that the Pope might see it as a kind of Christianized Marxism, given his profound mistrust of a system of thought that had left his native Poland in chains. Yet many progressive Latin American bishops at the time begged to differ. "[L]iberation theology is not a theology of violence or one that pushes toward violence," insisted Bishop Jose Ivo Lorscheiter of Santa Maria, Brazil. "It is not a theology that assumes or justifies Marxist ideology."

Dissention was not confined to the Americas. The condemnation of Swiss-born theologian Hans Küng struck a blow against a liberal thinker of worldwide reputation. In 1985, the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales issued a statement warning against "a lack of tolerance and a certain new fundamentalism" in the Church. The statement called for greater local autonomy and argued against what the bishops saw as a habit of referring to Rome "decisions which could be made locally."

But the local churches themselves have been profoundly changed by John Paul. The power to appoint is the power to control, and the Pope literally outlasted his adversaries. As liberals in the Church leadership passed on, John Paul replaced them with loyalists, minimizing dissent at the top. Emblematic of these changes were the Pope's appointments of John J. O'Connor as archbishop in New York City and Bernard F. Law as archbishop in Boston. (O'Connor has passed away, and Law left Boston for a Vatican post after he was widely criticized for his handling of the sex-abuse scandal.) The two were dubbed "Archbishops Law and Order" for their assigned roles of enforcing the Pope's version of orthodoxy on the restive American Church. There are

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now many more bishops like them.

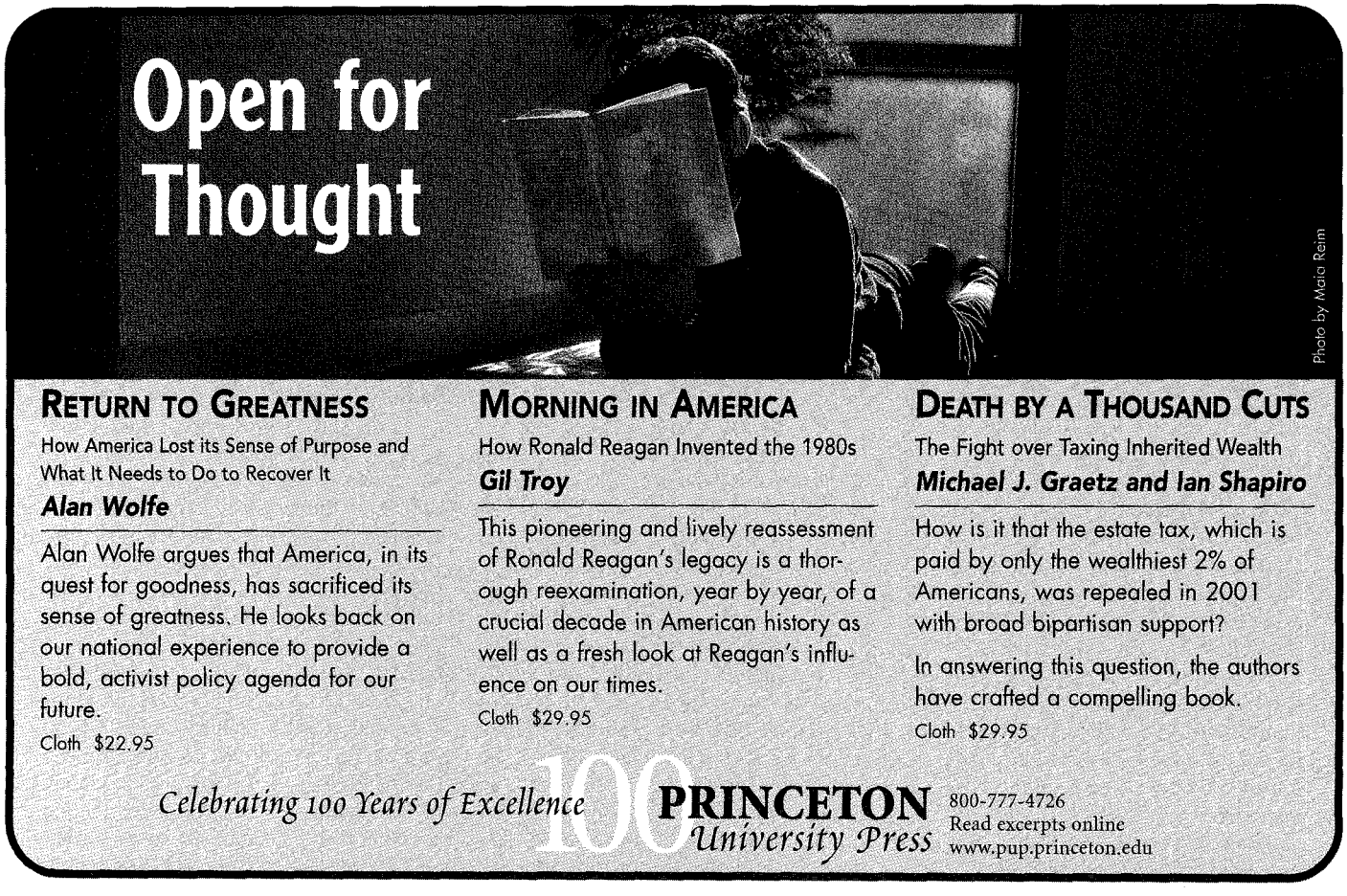
The Pope's insistence on democracy outside the Church thus did not translate to democracy inside the Church. His skilled spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, once offered an aphorism to explain why. "Authority is a guarantee of unity," Navarro-Valls said. "Authority is also a guarantee of truth." It's also true that authority too readily invoked can spark dissent, and some of John Paul's "truths"—like the proposition that women may never, under any circumstances, become priests—were simply not accepted among liberal American Catholics.

THERE IS, OF course, something profoundly dissatisfying about creating dueling balance sheets—the Liberal List and the Conservative List—in judging John Paul's papacy. There is a temptation to reduce all religion and spirituality to politics. But doing so ignores what John Paul saw as the heart of his mission: the recovery of the sacred in an often profane world. And, while the breathless commentaries after his death too readily resorted to Hollywood-style blather about John Paul, superstar, and the Pope's standing as a beatified rock idol, he did have something very close to that overworked word, charisma. The man cannot be reduced to his doctrine.

I was blessed—and I do mean to use that word—to cover the Pope as a journalist in the '80s. In my experience, at least, he was both powerful and serene. He could be warm and stern, mystical and down to earth, immensely worldly and thoroughly committed to the world beyond this one. Yeah, I liked the guy.

I was often asked if a Catholic covering the Pope could avoid bias. Naturally my answer is yes. But, putting aside a metaphysical discussion of what bias means in this context (or, for that matter, what I actually put into print), I concluded that my personal feelings were paradoxical: The more Catholic I felt, the tougher I was inclined to be on his papacy. About the Catholic Church I love, I have great anxieties about splits between left and right that deepened under John Paul. I worry about the declining number of priests and nuns and the dwindling ranks of clerics inspired by Vatican II. I worry about what my daughters will make of a Church that reserves so much power for men. I worry that the balance between free inquiry and doctrinal rigor has shifted too decisively in favor of a very particular definition of orthodoxy.

Yet I have little doubt about how John Paul's impact on his times will be judged. In the world's large struggles—over human rights and democracy, poverty and social justice, war and peace, life and death—the Pope, to use a quasi-Marxist phrase he would probably hate, put the Church on the right side of history. ■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# BOOKS & THE ARTS

## STANLEY KAUFFMANN ON FILMS

# Woody and Wine

WHEN WE GO TO A NEW film made by someone with a long career, we take considerable baggage with us. A first film or even a second film is one kind of experience: I can't fix a number at which we change to another experience, but it isn't gradual. Suddenly it comes about that a new film by a familiar director is either a matter of eagerness or a feeling that it would be unfair not to see his latest. In any case we take that director's whole filmography with us to the theater, not necessarily in specifics but in state of mind. We don't see this latest film quite as independently as we would a new director's work: we are always comparing it, favorably or not, with the director's past.

**MELINDA AND MELINDA**
(Fox Searchlight)

**MONDOVINO**
(THINKFilm)

With Woody Allen, this is of course inevitable. **MELINDA AND MELINDA** is his thirty-fifth picture, and one goes to it hoping for another *Annie Hall* or *Manhattan* or *Everyone Says I Love You*, yet with the worrisome knowledge that the bulk of his work has been below that level. The new film even begins with an Allen reminder: a discussion at a café table a good deal like the café-table opening of *Broadway Danny Rose*. That earlier discussion was between stand-up comics; this time it's two playwrights, one of them serious, the other comic. Each makes the case for his kind of writing—and makes it in drearily trite terms. The film then tries to dramatize the opposing views. Allen's screenplay takes a young woman in emotional stress and puts her, in alternating sequences, through a dramatic and a comic series of events, ostensibly to show the advantages of each treatment.

Compared with the tingle of some past Allen ideas, this plot quickly has a whiff of the bottom of the barrel, and he doesn't lift it as it goes. The tragic sequences begin with the young woman (Melinda) arriving in New York at the apartment of affluent friends, bringing with her an account of miseries. In the comic sequences Melinda lives downstairs from an actor and his film-maker wife, and in various developments she causes ructions. But the grave story is leaden, the comic story isn't funny, and the comparison—the rivalry—between the two modes is never crystallized. The double-feature idea is only an arthritic gimmick to launch one more picture, limp on for a (sufficient) while, and then stop.

The cast is adequate for the material. Radha Mitchell is competently tearful as one Melinda and competently bright as the other. This time Allen has not included a distinguished actor in his company, as he did with Max von Sydow or Judy Davis or Kenneth Branagh in the past. This cast's only real distinction is negative: Allen isn't in it. His filmmaking has notably improved through the years. His acting has not.

Two points about the screenplay. The dialogue is sometimes tired, almost shockingly so. When a couple breaks up, the man offers this excuse: "These things happen. Life is messy." By jiminy, that's true. The second matter is more delicate. Twice in the film young black men figure in the story, and in neither case is there a mention by anyone of race. Both of these men are attractive and intelligent, fit companions for any young woman. But none of Melinda's friends ever notes that these men are black. Her friends are civilized New York whites; still, it seems odd that none of them says something like, "That man is very nice, but does Melinda, in her present emotional state, need to add racial problems?" Omitting any mention of the men's race seems factitious, an attempt to bring into being a social state that doesn't yet quite exist. May the day soon come when awareness of race is irrelevant; but that day is not yet here.

Globalization has become, with sound reason, one of the looming phenomena of our time, fearsome not only through its strangling of individuality but because it has sloth-inducing attractions. A new documentary called **MONDOVINO** reveals the incursion of globalization into wine—what has come to be called the wine industry. Jonathan Nossiter, who has made three previous fiction films, has explored the matter in France and Italy and England and the United States, also briefly in Brazil.

The issue is an example of a by-now-classic confrontation. The small vintner, concerned only with quality, is being threatened in the production and selling of wine by the large corporations, whose products (says the small man) lack the personal characteristics that a wine ought to have. We meet some of the grizzled growers in Bordeaux and Sardinia and Burgundy, among other places, and we also travel along with a breezy wine consultant named Michel Rolland as he helps some of the big boys to get bigger. We meet the heads of some of the large companies—Mondavi and Antinori among them—and we hear how they have melded major business operations with principle, at least in their own minds.

Especially interesting is an interview with Robert Parker, the American wine critic whose opinions are immensely important in the wine trade. Parker himself seems modest enough and unimperious, though his good opinion has become very valuable to the winemakers. What he makes clear, indirectly, is that many people who buy and drink wine want to be considered knowing in the matter, fluent in the lexicon of wine-tasting, whatever their palates may be like. Parker, though this is not his intent, supplies them with choices and verbiage. He may be improving people's taste in wine: he is certainly improving their vocabularies.

The most appealing aspect of Nossi-

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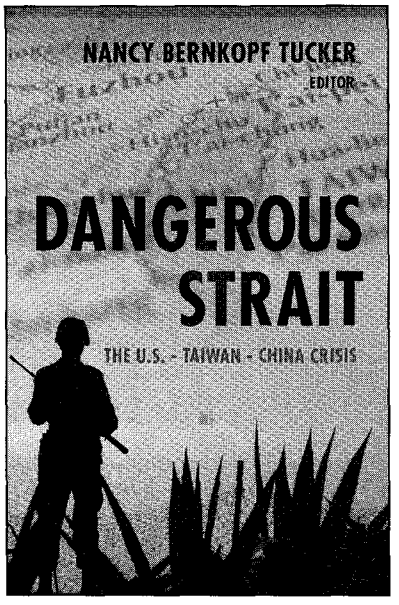


## Dangerous Strait

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**Nancy Bernkopf Tucker**

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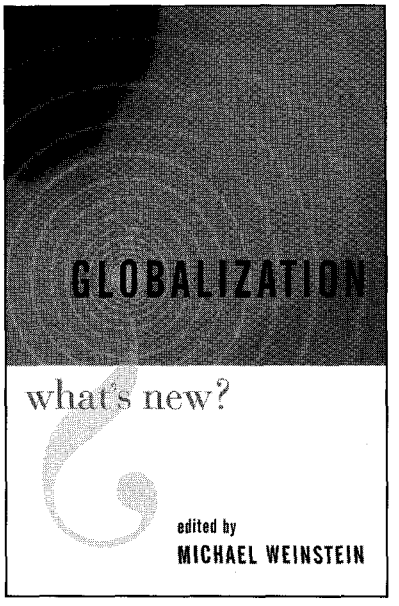


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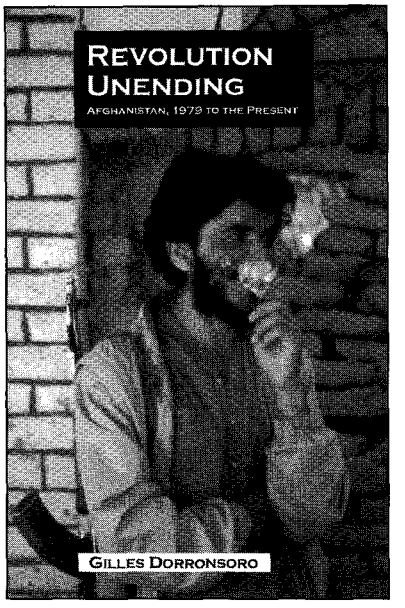


## Revolution Unending

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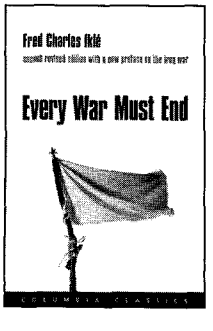


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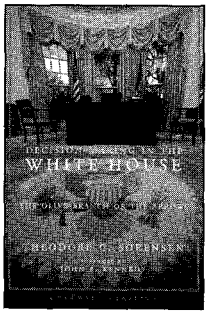


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ter's film is that he lets people depict themselves. The individual winemaker, usually elderly, is the man we expect him to be. And in the scenes with the high rollers, there is no caricature. They are clear and seem straightforward. This of course only intensifies the conflict. (Note: some of the Italian aristos whose families sold vineyards to the multinationals remember the Mussolini days with a touch of regret—the "at least the trains ran on time" theme applied to the wine business. It causes a shiver, but it's a shiver of realism.)

*Mondovino* is repetitious. The version that is being shown here runs 131 minutes and would be more effective with about twenty minutes of condensation. Some of the visits—Brazil, for instance—repeat matters that are already well established. But the film's basic theme, here instanced in an ancient and cherished craft, is once again dire. The world moves toward coercive simplifications. ■

*James Wood*

# On a Darkling Plain

SATURDAY
By Ian McEwan
*(Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 289 pp., $26)*

I.

IN SCHLEGEL'S FAMOUS APHORISM, the historian is a prophet facing backward. We could describe, in the same spirit, the novelist as a historian facing inward. This inward historian, or historian of inwardness, holds up no clear mirror but rather the mind's mirror—cloudy perhaps, stained, and losing some of its backing—to the world; that is to say, this historian watches how his or her fallible characters interpret reality, how they inhabit it, how they distort it and force it to accommodate to their mental cosmos. Novelists, then, are consumed by the question of representation twice over. They themselves see the world and describe or redescribe it; and they must describe their characters' own descriptions, too.

Thus we often have a sense, in fiction, of two different time signatures: the world is living in 6/8, as it were, and the novel's hero or heroine is thinking in 3/4. Most fictional characters think more slowly than reality passes; they are internal expansionists. The naïve hero of Chekhov's story "The Kiss" finally tells his cynical fellow soldiers about the moment when a glamorous woman kissed him, and he is disappointed because he had thought the story would "take all morning to tell but it had taken only a minute." The private story has swollen like bread in his warm mind.

Great historical events, such as wars and revolutions, refine this division between characters and history—between history and inwardness—by concentrating it to a point of irony: the gap between the public event and a fictional character's experience of that event may become comically or tragically acute. The novelist can disrupt the accepted record of a great public event by inserting his hero into it, and letting his hero distort that public record. (The novel itself, ideally, then becomes another kind of public record, a rival kind, as *War and Peace* is now considered by most readers to "narrate" a version of Napoleon's invasion of Russia.) This is what happens in *The Charterhouse of Parma* when Fabrizio del Dongo stumbles upon the battle of Waterloo, or in *Sentimental Education* when Frédéric, strolling with his mistress in Fontainebleau, hears reports of the revolution under way in Paris, or in *The Good Soldier Švejk* when the hapless hero is sent off to World War I.

The events of September 11, 2001 would appear to resemble any other great and appalling historical irruption; to offer the contemporary novelist the same capacious dualism that war and revolution offered Tolstoy or Hašek. But there are two major differences. The first is that the destruction of the Twin Towers was itself represented and represented, in an era uniquely marked by the obsessive over-representation of public events. Not only did we all see this calamity, but television became for most of us the grotesque verification of the calamity itself. And in a further irony, the "staging" of the conflagration seemed to have been conjured into being—to have been pre-imagined—by Hollywood disaster films. Thus into the novelist's dual representation (the world, and the characters' reading of the world) was thrown a third layer of mimesis: the version of the event as it was described for us on film and video. Any novelist wanting to narrate the occurrences of September 11 would most likely have to deal with a triple-skinned world, as if cutting through one of those mutant fruits whose membrane seems almost to have smothered its pith.

The second difference is that, unlike a conventional war or even a single massive extremity such as the sinking of the *Titanic*, the events of September 11 are surrounded by a great deal of invisible menace. There is a war on, but it is in part a war with our minds, and it is necessarily hidden. The terrorist, as Don DeLillo presciently suggested in *Mao II*, now alters the "inner life of the culture" as the novelist used to do. (The Cold War, and the threat of atomic annihilation, is a near parallel.) September 11 was thus a hideous paradox: a vast theatrical performance of a single scene from a play most of which is yet unwritten. September 11 was over-represented, but its actual dynamics remain under-represented. We still know extraordinarily little about the human motivation of the suicide bombers, despite the millions of journalistic words that have been spent on them. Novelists who venture into this territory may find themselves swinging between two difficult extremes, the explicit and the implicit, the too visible and the too invisible.

THE LENTO OF NOVELISTIC gestation—two or three years, it seems—has now brought about a number of fictional treatments of, or allusions to, September 11, chief of which are Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*, Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, David Foster Wallace's novella "The Suffering Channel," and Joyce Carol Oates's story "The Mutants." (I except a clearly belated addendum at the end of Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, a novel from 2002, in which the narrator refers to recent ghastly occurrences.) All of these works concern themselves in different ways with the gap between a character's reading of the world and the media's reading of that world.

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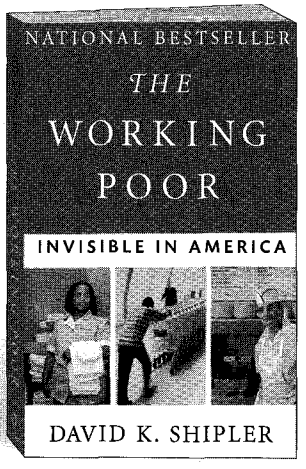


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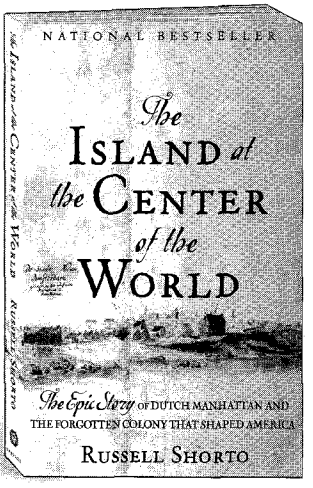
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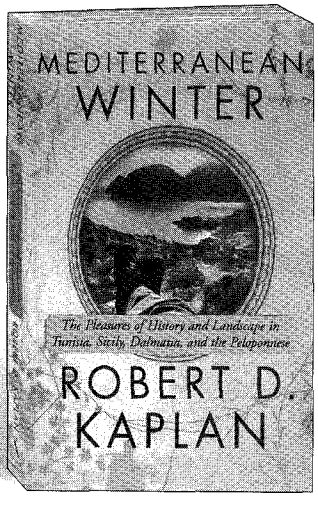
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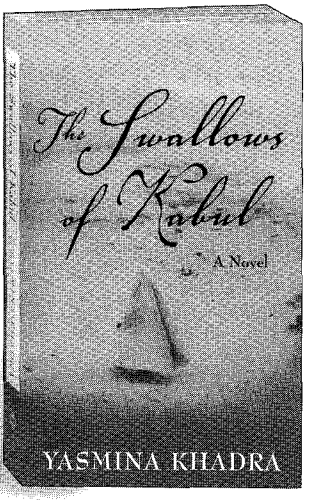


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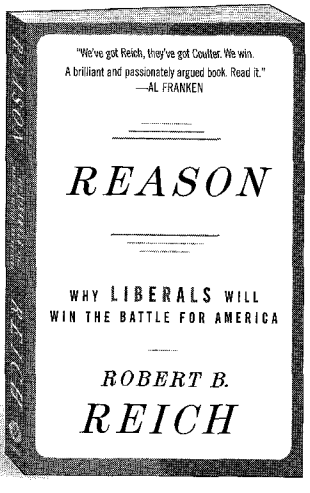
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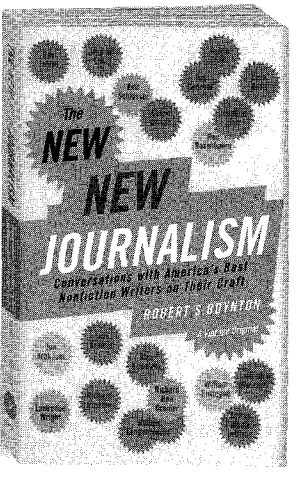


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Wallace's story is in part about a trashy style magazine whose office is in one of the towers; this is counterpointed by the arrival of a new cable television network called The Suffering Channel, which will be devoted to endless, twenty-four-hour coverage of pictures of humans in distress, culled from news programs around the world. The actual catastrophe of September 11, which is never described—the story "ends" on September 10—is squeezed out, as it were, between these two cheeks of trash journalism, the magazine and the television station (a rather Wallace-like image, in fact, for a story much concerned with shit). In Oates's story, a young New Yorker witnesses the first attack on the towers and barricades herself into her apartment nearby, taking perverse consolation from the strength of her doorlocks and the existence of her domestic fire extinguisher. The power is out, but she attempts to turn on her television, and then a few minutes later attempts to turn on her second television: "The blank gunmetal-gray screen confronted her. She thought *There is no news, yet.* This seemed to her comforting." In *Saturday*, which is set in London in 2003, Henry Perowne, a middle-aged neurosurgeon, laments his dependence on television news:

> He takes a step towards the CD player, then changes his mind for he's feeling the pull, like gravity, of the approaching TV news. It's a condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety. The habit's grown stronger these past two years; a different scale of news value has been set by monstrous and spectacular scenes. The possibility of their recurrence is one thread that binds the days. The government's counsel—that an attack in a European or American city is an inevitability—isn't only a disclaimer of responsibility, it's a heady promise. Everyone fears it, but there's also a darker longing in the collective mind, a sickening for self-punishment and a blasphemous curiosity. Just as the hospitals have their crisis plans, so the television networks stand ready to deliver, and their audiences wait. Bigger, grosser next time. Please don't let it happen. But let me see it all the same, as it's happening and from every angle, and let me be among the first to know.

The extra skin of representation that surrounds September 11 appears to have produced fiction that is necessarily concerned with the skin itself, with the novel's own representation of the world, with an explicit reflection on fiction's mimetic role. Indeed, in the months following September 2001, novelists and critics often wondered, in print and in private, about what fiction could do in the face of these enormities. There was doubtless a professional solipsism, and even an absurdity, in these self-questionings: fiction, like irony, proved curiously robust after all. But it was natural for novelists, their eyeballs burned by such lightning, to worry about the limits of vision. And the garish visibility of the tragedy seemed indeed to throw down a gauntlet: on the one hand, the novelist felt dwarfed by the elephantine misprisions of the televisual media, and on the other the novelist was sure that he or she must correct that medium, must outwrite journalism's hasty hieroglyphics. Jonathan Safran Foer's novel plays its juvenile narrator off against "official" depictions of September 11, and is not shy to appropriate some of those official forms for its own sometimes excitable uses (fifteen grainy photographs of someone falling from one of the towers, assembled into a child's flip-movie scrapbook). *Saturday* is explicitly involved with questions about fiction and its ability to render the world: Henry Perowne, the neurosurgeon, has no time for novels, and is suspicious of their motives and achievements. Yet McEwan's book finally stages a kind of battle between art and its apparent enemies, and art wins—or at least makes its case.

## II.

In the week following the fall of the towers, Ian McEwan published two articles in *The Guardian*. Both were affecting. Neither mentioned fiction or fiction's obligations, but in the light of his new novel both pieces can be seen to have silhouetted this unspoken theme. The first reflected on the shame that the novelist felt at his ghoulish addiction to television news. It was written only two days after the event, and boiled with first impressions. The second article, three days later, was a more considered statement. McEwan noted that it was what we could not see, beyond the range of television cameras—people falling from windows, for instance, or the final cell phone calls—that colonized the imagination. He characterized our mental state thus: "Instead, we remember what we have seen, and we daydream helplessly. Lately, most of us have inhabited the space between the terrible actuality and these daydreams. Waking before dawn, going about our business during the day, we fantasize ourselves into the events. What if it was me?"

## Flowers

And brought home flowers then
The glad blue iris, bright carnation
Bouncing on top of the laundry basket
In a white car on thin roads
Passing hedges and plowed fields in the rain

And brought them flowers
The wife pleased, arranging
The schoolgirl's glee when she came home
The baby reaching up toward them
As he would toward the rising of the sun

East wind over the moss wall and garden
Sky and shadow streaming by the window
In the gray row house, two up two down
The little square of family then
A frame around the table at dusk

And brought home this gesture with the clean wash
A curve of color marking Wednesdays
Each week the fish man, vegetable man
A new word in the schoolgirl's books
The baby's eyes and hands

And drove home each week through stone villages
Girton, Histon, the names blurring
Smoke from allotment gardens on the wind then
Berries in wet hedgerows
Red as any blood

**DON BOGEN**

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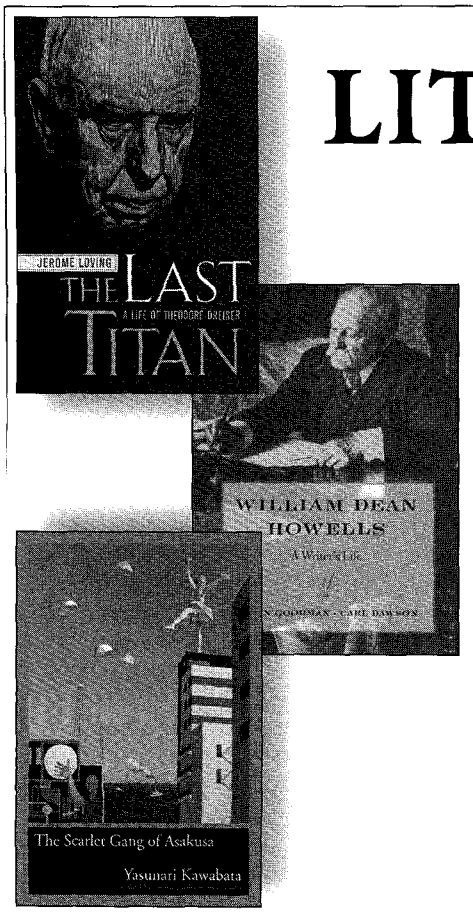
This, he continued, is the nature of empathy, "to think oneself into the minds of others.... Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality." The suicide attackers, by contrast, had suffered "a failure of the imagination." They would not have been able to do what they did had they been able to imagine the suffering they would cause. McEwan wrote about the victims' final phone calls, and their universal simplicity: "I love you." He argued for the importance of "those three words that all the terrible art, the worst pop songs and movies, the most seductive lies, can somehow never cheapen." And he dared a noble Audenesque asymmetry: "Love was all they had to set against the hatred of their murderers."

Without directly addressing the issues, McEwan touched on the two exceptional elements of September 11, its visibility and its invisibility. He reflected on its over-representation by visual media, while the novelist in him was also consumed by all that this over-representation omitted. Implicitly, he appeared to argue that imaginative exercise—the very faculty the bombers lacked—might go some way toward correcting both extremes. The imagination would cut through all the millions of received pictures, while daring to picture the visually unrepresentable. Without writing a word about fiction, McEwan had defended fiction's cardinal task, its ability to entertain lives other than our own—to be the historian of inwardness. And without explicitly making the connection, he suggested a natural alliance between love and the exercise of the imagination, and hence between love and art.

These are precisely the themes and dynamics of *Saturday*. But there is a quality of liberal wish-fulfillment in the idea that we might "set against" terrorism love and the imagination. What if, as seems likely, the terrorists had indeed imagined the deaths of their hated American victims? The imagination is blessed by its holder, just as the humanities humanize only those who are willing to be humanized. Ian McEwan's imagination is worth cherishing; Mohammed Atta's is not. It is just this tension that surfaces in his fine and affecting new novel, and which is never quite resolved.

*Saturday* in effect stages a conflict between liberal decency and illiberal menace in the private sphere, and sets this conflict within the larger context of political liberalism and its menace by terrorism. Henry Perowne, a forty-eight-year-old neurosurgeon, lives prosperously in a fine London square. He is happily married to Rosalind, a lawyer for a newspaper, and has two successful children: Theo, an already noted blues guitarist, and Daisy, who is about to have her first book of poems published by Faber and Faber. One Saturday morning he wakes before dawn (like the bereft daydreamers McEwan wrote about in his *Guardian* piece), feeling alert and buoyant. Looking down from his window at the gracious square, he feels that London is a great success,

> a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly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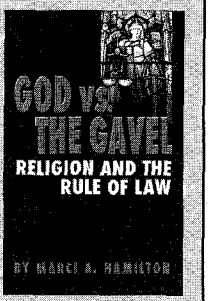


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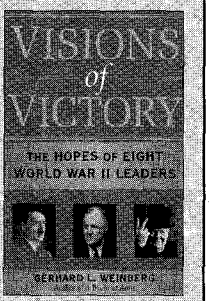


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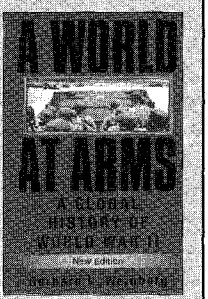


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everyone wanting it to work. And the Perownes' own corner, a triumph of congruent proportion; the perfect square laid out by Robert Adam enclosing a perfect circle of garden—an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting.

Perowne is a scientific optimist, a rational meliorist, and throughout the novel's first half he will return to his belief in progress. (He jokes to his daughter that if he were asked to construct a religion, it would be the religion of evolution itself.) Driving through London in his sleek Mercedes, listening to Schubert, he thinks:

> At every level, material, medical, intellectual, sensual, for most people it has improved. The teachers who educated Daisy at university thought the idea of progress old-fashioned and ridiculous. In indignation, Perowne grips the wheel tighter in his right hand. He remembers some lines by Medawar, a man he admires: "To deride the hopes of progress is the ultimate fatuity, the last word in poverty of spirit and meanness of mind."... If the present dispensation is wiped out now, the future will look back on us as gods, certainly in this city, lucky gods blessed by supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm clothes that weigh nothing, extended lifespans, wondrous machines.

But this is not an ordinary Saturday, and the "present dispensation" is menaced. It is February 2003, and on this Saturday hundreds of thousands of demonstrators will gather in London to protest the British government's apparent determination to go to war against Iraq, a decision that might itself be the rotten fruit of the events of September 11. As he stands at his window in the cool dawn, Perowne's eye is caught by what looks at first like a comet but is actually a plane. Its wing is on fire, and it seems to be trying to land at Heathrow. "It's already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again, the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed." The plane does land. Throughout the day, Perowne will turn on the television, mainly to find out what happened to the plane, partly to keep up with news about the massive London marches—above all in order to receive television's baptism. It emerges that it was a Russian cargo plane; the pilots are arrested on suspicion of terrorism. By the end of the day, they have been released: it was just a mechanical fault.

*SATURDAY* IS SET ON A SINGLE day, both with great naturalness and with the self-consciousness that always attends such literary endeavors. (It is written, for instance, in the present tense, a tense that mimics real-time continuity but in fact always draws attention to the stop-time of writing itself.) Like *Atonement*, also a fictional argument about fiction, *Saturday* alludes to other novels and writers. It has a long epigraph from *Herzog*, and is palpably indebted to *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses*. It closes with a whisper of allusion to Joyce's story "The Dead." Its dénouement turns on a reading of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." Less obviously, McEwan has, I think, read *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo's novel set on a single day, and he has learned from DeLillo's errors.

McEwan's protagonist, like DeLillo's, spends several hours driving through a big city, and has a similar fondness for what Bellow once called "modern speculation." But Henry Perowne has nothing in common with DeLillo's pomo technoanalyst. His thoughtfulness is thoughtful rather than theoretical. McEwan writes far better prose than DeLillo's smeary stylish ecstasies. His severely planed and rich sentences are supple, disciplined, natural—a rigorous dovetailing. There are moments of quietly satirical wit: "Once a week, usually on a Sunday evening, they [Henry and Rosalind] line up their personal organisers side by side, like little mating creatures, so that their appointments can be transferred into each other's diary along an infrared beam." But the prose is also capable of aeration, and London is caught in precise sensuous detail. Above all, the novel manages to inhabit the mind of a not immediately fascinating man—"a droning, pedestrian diagnostician," he thinks of

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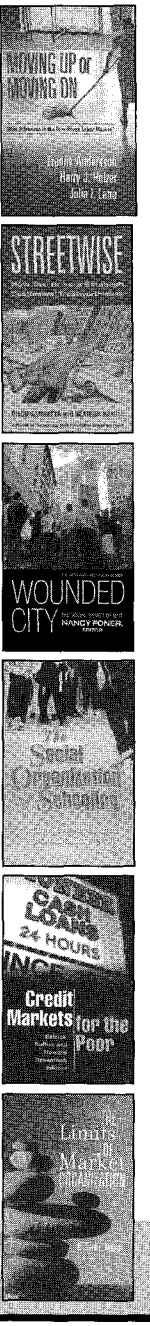
himself, and also something of a philistine—and move easily from that mind to general reflection and back, without ever losing narrative pressure.

> He turns the corner into Paddington Street and stoops in front of the open-air display of fish on a steeply raked slab of white marble. He sees at a glance that everything he needs is here. Such abundance from the emptying seas. On the tiled floor by the open doorway, piled in two wooden crates like rusting industrial rejects, are the crabs and lobsters, and in the tangle of warlike body parts there is discernible movement. On their pincers they're wearing funereal black bands. It's fortunate for the fishmonger and his customers that sea creatures are not adapted to make use of sound waves and have no voice. Otherwise there'd be howling from those crates.... He turns his gaze away, towards the bloodless white flesh, and eviscerated silver forms with their unaccusing stare, and the deep-sea fish arranged in handy overlapping steaks of innocent pink, like cardboard pages of a baby's first book.

Henry Perowne's Saturday starts out on the two poles between which it will swing all day: the consolations of family and the desolation of terror. Shaken, he chooses not to tell his wife about the witnessed airplane; they have quick but happy sex (she is on her way to work). Henry talks to his son—they watch the news together in the kitchen, eager for information about the aircraft—and then he drives his expensive car toward the squash court where he will play his weekly game with a colleague. He has a few errands and chores: he must visit his mother (a marvelous and terrible scene, beautifully written), who is suffering from dementia and lives in a home, and he must buy the fish for dinner. His daughter is returning from six months in Paris, and his father-in-law, a famous poet resident for years in France, will also be present. It is a rare gathering.

On the way to the squash court, he encounters the marchers, who are noisy and cheerful. A confused middle-aged liberal, Perowne is unsure about what to think. His children are reflexively against the imminent war. But he has treated the aneurysm of an Iraqi professor who had been in Saddam's prisons, and his views are darkened by what he knows. (The two rather careful pages devoted to the tribulations of the imprisoned and tortured professor are generically written up, and are unworthy of the novel: they could have been compiled by a committee.) The jollity of the marchers seems too decisive to Henry: "If they think—and they could be right—that continued torture and summary executions, ethnic cleansing and occasional genocide are preferable to an invasion, they should be sombre in their view." The protestors are marching, he decides, for both peace and torture, but they admit no such complexity. Henry and his daughter will argue the fierce switchback of this politics later in the afternoon; Daisy is amazed that her father, in his very irresolution, has joined the side of the hated Americans.

Accelerating to avoid the march, Henry has a minor collision with a red BMW, breaking off its wing mirror; and like a spreading wound, the encounter will gradually incarnadine the already shaky Saturday. From the car emerge three tough-looking thugs. When Henry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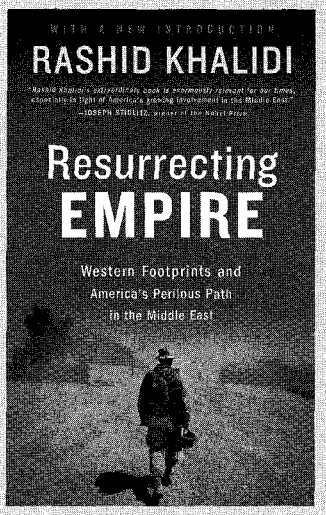
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refuses their suggestion that he walk to the nearest ATM and withdraw the cash to pay for the mirror, their leader, a man named Baxter, throws Perowne against a fence and punches him in the chest. But Perowne has the advantage. He has noticed a tremor in Baxter's arms, and an inability to move his eyes independently of his body. He diagnoses a degenerative neurological disease, and acting on a hunch, tells Baxter that he can help him. Baxter is thrown by the observation, and the publicity of his illness seems to humiliate him before his friends. The imminent beating of Perowne fizzles away, and Henry makes his squash game after all.

McEwan, expert as always at narrative stealth, has planted a fizzing pill, and we know that some horrid bubble must rise to the surface later in the day. During the course of the next hour or two, Perowne catches sight of a red BMW that appears to be tailing him, but he fails to see the wing mirror. At dinnertime, as the guests gather, Baxter, armed with a knife, forces his way into the Perowne home. The scene is almost unbearably tense. A long siege, and perhaps worse, is avoided when Daisy, the young poet, calms Baxter by reciting "Dover Beach" to him. He has demanded that she strip and read him some of her verse, from a proof copy he sees on a table. Naked and trembling, she recites Arnold's poem, which he mistakes for one of hers. Baxter is obscurely moved by the poem, and can only say, again and again: "You wrote that." The novel ends with the purging of menace, or seems to: late that night, the traumatized couple, Henry and Rosalind, share the day's events, and make love again, making a circle of the book's diurnal thread. But the circle is broken. Perowne finds himself at the window again, as he began the day, but now "timid, vulnerable," and full of death-filled thoughts. He is "scared of the way consequences of an action leap away from your control and breed new events." So the private uncertainty and the public uncertainty—the unintended consequences of any Iraq invasion—merge at the book's close.

## III.

READING MCEWAN, THERE ARE times when one feels that the extreme narrative order—his clean joins and hinges—have been purchased at too high a cost to credibility, and sometimes even to animation and free life. Perowne is convincingly rendered in all his literalism and bland scientific ardor; but McEwan overdoes the extent to which his entire life seems to be saturated by medical language and know-how. Pushkin famously complained that Byron's conspirators even ordered a drink conspiratorially, and Proust wisely observed the "lack (or seeming lack) of participation by a person's soul in the virtue of which he or she is the agent." Proust goes on to say that whenever he has come across, in convents for instance, truly saintly people, they have always had the "cheerful, practical, brusque and unemotioned air of a busy surgeon." McEwan's doctor is too completely medical.

With Proustian complexity, Perowne should be more nun-like and less surgical. He watches a drug addict scratching herself and sees "amphetamine-driven formication.... Or an exogenous opioid-induced histamine reaction, common among new users." He sees that Baxter's convulsive temper is typical of his disease, and "suggestive of reduced levels of GABA among the appropriate binding sites on striatal neurons." Perowne's tendency to supply medical terminology whenever possible violates the delicacy—finely achieved elsewhere in the book—of McEwan's free indirect style, for if Perowne were thinking to himself, why would he need to remind himself so often of what he already knows anyway? There seems to be no medical complaint he has not mastered, when anecdotal evidence suggests that, to the contrary, hospital doctors are as specialized as academics: you can't expect them to know, as it were, about Pope *and* Pound. McEwan's steely research glints through the fabric of his narrative:

> Opening up the back of the head needed great care because of the vessels running close under the bone.... Finally it lay exposed, the tentorium—the tent—a pale delicate structure of beauty, like the little whirl of a veiled dancer, where the dura is gathered and parted again. Below it lay the cerebellum.... The astrocytoma was well defined and had only partially infiltrated surrounding tissue. Perowne was able to excise almost all of it without damaging any eloquent region.

But one will forgive much when prose is as good as this—"like the little whirl

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of a veiled dancer ... any eloquent region"—and in fairness McEwan wants to impress on us the distinctively prosaic nature of this "professional reductionist" and "droning" diagnostician. Perowne has no time for his daughter's poems (he enjoys his son's music), and although she has given him novels to read, he cannot see the point. He doesn't believe his daughter when she tells him that people need stories in order to live, since he doesn't need them. Fiction seems inefficient to him, a clumsy provider and framer of knowledge: too imprecise. At the same time, fiction seems too tidy, too unlike life's messiness. "Unlike in Daisy's novels," he reflects to himself, "moments of precise reckoning are rare in real life; questions of misinterpretation are not often resolved. Nor do they remain pressingly unresolved. They simply fade." Life is always more formless than art.

Into Henry Perowne's tidy life, on this fateful Saturday, will burst an imprecise, menacingly messy force. Perowne would be the last person to believe that such discontents can be countered by art; and yet this is exactly the battle the novel stages, pitting Matthew Arnold against Baxter's inchoate anger. Should Perowne, then, learn something from the very novel of which he is a character? Doubtless he should, except that in a paradox that also haunted *Atonement*, McEwan's novel, in its very argumentation, tends toward its own kind of convenient tidiness. McEwan gets around this obvious problem, I think, by plunging for the irrational. Baxter represents the irruption of the irrational; his kind of terror is not opposed by fiction as such, but by a nobler version of the irrational—by poetry, by song, by music, and by love. Earlier in the book, Perowne attended his son's band's rehearsal, and while the glorious blues sang out, he reflected on music's implicit utopianism—a collaboration, "an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself.

> Out in the real world there exist detailed plans, visionary projects for peaceable realms, all conflicts resolved, happiness for everyone, for ever—mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill. Christ's kingdom on earth, the workers' paradise, the ideal Islamic state. But only in music, and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it's tantalisingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes.

It is not fiction, then, with its habitual coincidences and unnatural encounters—of which this book has its fill—but the ungraspable communion of music that might be "set against the hatred of their murderers." Against a dark irrationality can perhaps be posed the enlightened irrationality of music's fleeting utopia.

VERSE, OF COURSE, IS NOT irrational, and it does not hover beyond reference, as music does. But it has its roots in song and music, and in Arnold's poem the poet hears a kind of music, the note of eternal sadness, its "tremulous cadence." This musical and poetic realm is our "eloquent region," to use Perowne's phrase about the cerebellum, and it is wielded against Baxter, whose own eloquent regions are diseased and dying. But there is something uneasy about this, and the stark binarism of the *Guardian* piece returns here. Arnold versus Baxter has something of Ariel and Caliban about it, beauty and the beast. If recent events in this country are anything to go by, a reading of Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* would probably do the trick with violent intruders better than a dose of Arnold. I suspect that McEwan is perfectly aware of both the over-allegorical turn his book takes and the sentimental quality of the contest itself. The contest is beyond rationality, and beyond, in a sense, the explanation of the novel: it is a hope, a flourish, a plangent asymmetry very like the one McEwan waved in his *Guardian* piece. And just as that piece silently conjoined love, art, and the imagination, so "Dover Beach," used in this context, does the same, that poem whose most celebrated lines are "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!"

In a sense, the optimistic gesture is itself a piece of song. That is to say, it is the kind of exhortation, the kind of dream, that belongs best in the compact explosions of lyricism. No one—except perhaps the poet himself, in later life—really begrudges Auden the sentimentality of "We must love one another or die," because the line is but a phrase—the top notes, if you like, the crescendo—from a lyrical song. We indulge its music. McEwan's equivalent crescendo is necessarily harder to pull off in a novel,

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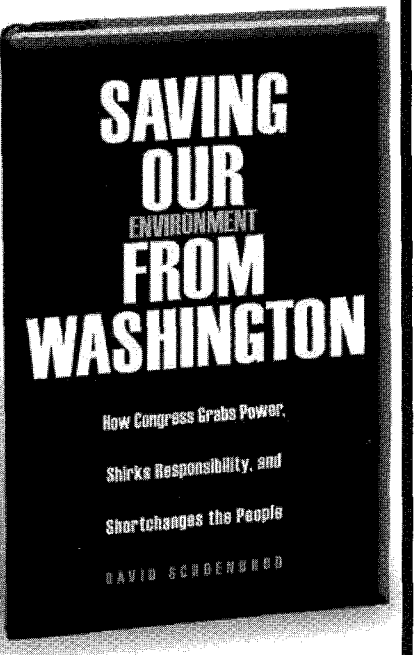


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whose form elongates, by dramatizing, such single lines of lyrical optimism, turning music into inevitable argumentation. Ideas, when enacted in fiction, become more vulnerable than their equivalent in poetry, because drama reifies them, forces them into bodily form.

McEwan, as if sensing that his novel, even in this play for the irrational, has become too allegorical, lowers the didactic pressure, and the book ends beautifully, in lyrical uncertainty. Fiction, as it were, reclaims its messiness, its imprecision. Perowne, it should be made clear, does not necessarily assume, any more than the novel does, that poetry has routed menace, and that everyone can sleep. Indeed, comically and ironically, Perowne the philistine had assumed, like Baxter, that Daisy was reading one of her own works. In the final pages Perowne stands once again at his window, in the predawn chill, and thinks of his mother, who will soon die, and of his father-in-law, whose turn it will be next. His mind plays ahead, into the certain-uncertain future: his children will grow up and move away, he will retire from active surgery, and then he and Rosalind will "find they no longer have strength for the square, the junkies and the traffic din and dust. Perhaps a bomb in the cause of jihad will drive them out with all the other faint-hearts into the suburbs, or deeper into the country ... their Saturday will become a Sunday." At the last, the novel's literalist hero delicately gathers his very literal Saturday, and makes it metaphorical, emblematic; all our Saturdays will become Sundays, as all our yesterdays have lit the way to dusty death. ■

# *James Wolcott*
# Unlucky Jim

MY LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES: A SURVIVOR'S TALE
By James Atlas
*(HarperCollins, 220 pp., $25.95)*

ACCORDING TO POPULAR stereotype, Middle-Aged Man plods a treadmill of malaise, ennui, futility, and burden, and that's assuming he can pry himself off the couch to reach the treadmill. Once Middle-Aged Man was young, frisky, full of sap. But, to paraphrase the old song, the winds grew colder, and suddenly he is older and the dreams that he dreamt have all gone astray. He's a beanbag marking time. "The most awful thing about middle age is that you are simply a body with nothing particular to recommend it," the poet James Dickey rued, and with each year under Middle-Aged Man's belt (a belt that keeps cinching tighter), his powers ebb, his passions cool, his pleasures pall, his appetites wane, his balls droop, his hair grays and jumps ship, his children nudge him further to the sidelines, and his wife becomes progressively more exasperated with his lack of zing. At night he lies dormant, staring at the flocks of worry birds and what-might-have-beens circling the ceiling. The next day it's back to the same rut, as Middle-Aged Man begins the morning handicapping the obituary page to calculate his odds of survival.

James Atlas is one of those grim odds-makers. "I had reached the age where I turned to the obits in the *Times* first—even before the front page," the fifty-something critic, novelist, and editor announces in *My Life in the Middle Ages: A Survivor's Tale*. Used to be, mostly older coots and noble achievers occupied the obits. "Then something happened. People my own age, or not much older, began to die." Everywhere he looks, someone is missing. He pores over the obituary pages of his college alumni magazine, takes a graveyard stroll through his address book ("My address book is a necropolis: Allan Bloom, dead.... Zita Cogan, friend of Saul Bellow, dead"), and notes fewer familiar faces in the elevator ("Neighbors are being carried out of my building at an alarming rate").

Recent studies by gerontologists and other social scientists indicate that midlife may actually be the sweet spot in personal growth—"the 'it' you've been working toward," as the sociologist Ron Kessler told Winifred Gallagher in *The Atlantic Monthly*—but to Atlas, middle age is the brown spot on a banana destined for the garbage pail. Like his late father Donald, who announced at his fiftieth birthday party that he was now facing the "downward slope of the bell curve," Atlas has crested and is heading into the dark valley below. He hopes to eke out his biblical allotment, but the book's cover photo of a white-haired, dark-suited gent stretched across trolley tracks in Manhattan's Meatpacking District suggests someone who has already laid himself out for burial.

Those delving into *My Life in the Middle Ages* to discover what brought Atlas to this supine pass may be disappointed that the book is intended as more of a survey course of male middle age—a guide for the harried man—than a personal bare-all. "Those looking for confession and brutal self-disclosure will do better to look elsewhere," he advises. Where, where?

MY LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES germinated from a series of articles that Atlas wrote for *The New Yorker* under Tina Brown, who assigned him to eulogize "the death of fun." Gone were the boogie nights and bleary mornings of guilt-free drinking, drugging, and night-clubbing emblazoned in Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* and the histories of Studio 54. In the workaholic, neo-puritan 1990s, everybody—which in New York translates into "everybody I know"—had become meek bourgeois mice on boring good behavior. Atlas's party-pooper report drew sacks of mail at the magazine. A smattering of hipster doofuses razzed him for being an old fart. "But there were also many readers who identified with the pathos of my theme and grasped what I was getting at: every generation is forced to endure its own obsolescence," Atlas writes in the introduction. "Yet nothing can prepare us for what it feels like to be ushered out. Each generation regards with incredulity the prospect of its own mortality. In the shadow of my lighthearted piece a somber message lurked."

Nothing like pointing out the chiaroscuro subtleties of your own work, and in a subsequent *New Yorker* "personal

*James Wolcott is a contributing writer to* VANITY FAIR *and the author of* ATTACK POODLES AND OTHER MEDIA MUTANTS *(Miramax).*

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history," he shoved the somber message into the front seat as he recounted the failure of his first novel, *The Great Pretender*, and the funk that followed. This spurred another downpour of mail, many from readers spelling out their own bouts with the blues. "I felt like Miss Lonelyhearts, inadvertently tapping into the fathomless pool of human pain, regret, humiliation, sorrow, misfortune, disaster, and tragedy buried under the cheerful surface of most lives," Atlas writes, excerpting some of the fan mail from his fellow flounders. "It's a cold winter day and I'm wasting another day at the Chicago Board of Trade, bored to death...." "At forty-one and three-quarters, I quit my job at CBS to pursue my dreams of making films...." "I spent a year in my house in Malibu sitting in a chair and staring at the wall."

Being bored at the Chicago Board of Trade, trading a media job in your early forties for a new vocation, staring at the wall in Malibu—these aren't exactly cries from the ragged depths. Although mindful that he is a spokesmodel in *My Life* for a select strata of middle-ager—"I realize that, on one level, these pieces describe only a highly rarefied segment of society: the middle- and upper-middle-class Manhattan dwellers who lead lives of privilege"—Atlas humbly submits that on a deeper, darker, more meaningful level of pathos, he is expressing the existential blahs of an entire generation, whatever their social status or tax bracket.

I think he's humoring himself. The letters that he quotes confirm Tina Brown's itchy instinct in commissioning the original *New Yorker* pieces—to arouse and to feed "a hunger among people of a certain age and social standing to read about themselves." It wasn't the universality of Atlas's reflections that resounded with *New Yorker* readers, it was the nuggety particulars of private-school bills and mortgage payments (which permitted readers and fellow writers to compare notes), and the inside glimpse of the free-floating status anxiety that crackles in the subtext of every cocktail party cha-cha contest. (How could that cute publicist from Hyperion not know my name? Did Bob Gottlieb ignore my hello, or did he just not see me? Does the tartan vest make me look fat?) In sum, Atlas was narrowcasting to the chattering class, addressing the group narcissism of the opinion bloc of the cognitive elite who can't get enough of themselves. So too with his book, which serves nicely as a companion volume to David Denby's *American Sucker*, another self-exposé of an uptown intellectual journalist's midlife crisis.

THE BELL-CURVE ARC OF *MY Life in the Middle Ages* traces a dying fall: the heart illness, hospitalization, demise, and burial of Atlas's father. "I feel like I'm being swept out to sea," Donald laments in his hospital bed, wired like Frankenstein's monster to a battery of heart monitors, electrocardiogram machines, and IV drips. Afflicted and blessed with "the sad Russian gene," Atlas's father possesses a grim comic gravity, an affection for the fatalistic. "Whenever my friend Richard was over," recalls Atlas of his childhood in Evanston, Illinois, "my father would entertain him by reciting the dour aphorisms of Richard's dad: 'You're kicking field goals at twilight.' 'You're rocking a dead baby.'" Donald also enjoyed quoting the misanthropic mantra of his uncle Albert, "who would stand in a corner at family gatherings


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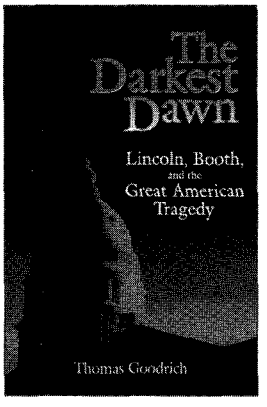


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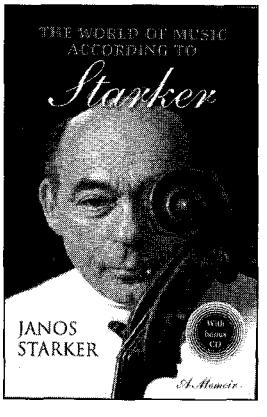


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and, shaking his head, mutter 'people, people, people.' "

It's a pity some of the mordant wit that Atlas's father treasured was not bequeathed to his son, who seldom lets a banality slip his grasp. (Studying the scene at an assisted-living center, he reflects, "It's so hard to remember that these people were once young—that they not only had lives, but sex lives.") Even so, this chronicle of a death foretold is the most affecting chapter in the book. How could it not be? The deathbed vigil in the hospital room is a primal scene in literature, memoir, and theater. It is a scene nearly everyone someday will have to play, and a scene no one knows how to play. ("Words cannot express, words cannot express," John Lydon chants in Public Image Ltd.'s "Death Disco," watching his mother waste away from cancer.) Atlas renders those final irretrievable eggshell moments with the right ghostly touch.

Then he goes and wrecks it. Sometime after the funeral service, Atlas stops by a pond where his father liked to go and feed the carp. In remembrance and contemplation, he sits on a bench and tosses food pellets to the fish. The chapter ends:

> And Dad was gone. Only the carp remained, floating in the mineral-dark water. I sat there for a long time.
>
> Two weeks later, the World Trade Center blew up.

*Say what?* The sentence tomahawks out of nowhere, a surprise capper that makes the reader do a double take, maybe a triple. Apart from proximity on the calendar, there is no meaningful connection between the two events. His father's death was not the tumbling domino that knocked over the Twin Towers, and the tragedy of September 11 plays little part in the ensuing text, which is organized into thematic reflections on Time, Home, Money, Failure, Shrinks, The Body, Books, God, Twenty-fifth Anniversary, and Death, and written in a chattier tone. What did the victims of September 11 do to deserve *this*?

In the chapter on God, our spiritually unquenched author shops around for faith, not unlike Woody Allen in *Hannah and Her Sisters* checking out the Hare Krishnas and stocking up on Catholic kitsch. Raised agnostic ("My parents, like many second-generation Jews, had no patience with organized religion"), he attends a synagogue service and chants the prayer known as Yigdal in transliterated Hebrew; he sticks his head into a monastery in Cambridge, and flirts with the notion of inviting one of the monks to lunch ("But how would I address it? *One of the Monks, The Society of Saint John the Evangelist, 980 Memorial Drive, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138*: 'Dear white-haired guy. . . ' "); and he ponders shucking it all and becoming a dharma bum: "Someday I would go [to Tibet], jouncing over muddy tundra in a Land Rover with four-wheel drive, drinking yak's milk, sleeping in tents." In "Shrinks," he sketches a succession of quirky therapists trying to fix what's wrong under his hood, ranging from a Freudian with literary pretensions to a psychopharmacologist who, when medication fails to prevent Atlas from dive-bombing into despair, recommends that he purchase an iPod: "They're unbelievable mood enhancers." Problem is, the neurotic Jewish intellectual on the psychiatric couch is just so "done" after *Portnoy's Complaint*, Daniel Menaker's *The Treatment*, and the films of Woody Allen/Paul Mazursky/Albert Brooks that this carousel ride seems tired, despite its goofy elements. Similarly, the section on money, which sends Atlas through a different series of revolving doors in search of a financial guru, seems pale and mousy after the turbo-charged auto-destructo panic-attacking tailspin of Denby's memoir, which presented the lusty spectacle of a highbrow seized hostage by his ego after he decides to score a quick million in the stock market, only to get chicken-plucked. In contrast, Atlas is simply trying to squeeze a better return on his investments, which at one point returned an anemic 1.2 percent annually. It is hard to find anything spiritually exciting about this. It certainly doesn't make for gripping melodrama.

YET WHO CAN'T IDENTIFY with Atlas's fear and trembling as he opens each month's stack of bills as if working in a bomb-disposal unit, never knowing which envelope might explode? And wondering, as we all do, where all the money goes. No matter how much he makes, it never seems enough. At the end of this somber ceremony of check-writing, he is again in the red, yet somehow the household stays afloat. This is the predicament confronted by millions of Americans, the slow, methodical drainage that was the subject of Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi's excellent book *The Two-Income Trap*, but Atlas has advantages that most others do not, which he tends to discount. When Atlas divulged his finances in *The New Yorker*, the article "elicited annoyance in some quarters," he notes in the introduction. "I ventured to name actual sums—probably a mistake. Honesty, I was beginning to discover, may not always be the best policy." But what rankled, as I recall, was not his candor (such as his claim that it took $350,000 a year to live properly in Manhattan), but his whiny poor-mouthing. Implicit in the *New Yorker* article, and in much of *My Life in the Middle Ages*, is the presumption that Atlas's rank as a Manhattan writer—a byliner who has played the finest club—privileges him somehow, makes him deserve better. It's hard to listen to someone who owns a Manhattan apartment and a country house singing the blues.

The chapter devoted to Atlas's Vermont country house—"Home"—is dabbed with welcome self-deprecation until it goes thoughtful on us. Like Bob Newhart running a Vermont inn in the CBS sitcom, Atlas tries to fit in with the local yokels and strike the right laconic poses, surveying nature's handiwork with pioneer-settler pride.

> When Butch, the farmer who tilled the field, stood beside me on the front steps gazing out over the land, a filterless Camel cupped underhand in his palm, I would savor our nearly wordless communion. "Whatcha gonna put in this year?" I'd say in my weekender's country drawl, a railroad cap on my head and a long blade of grass between my teeth. "Corn." I nodded sagely: Corn. Good choice. "We'll raid the field and pick some for ourselves," I said. "That's *cow corn*, Jim," Butch replied.

But compared with Edmund Wilson's memoir *Upstate*, in which the family summer house in Talcottville serves as a ramshackle stage for the magisterial dispensations of Wilson's mind, Atlas's ruminations could slide neatly into the average shelter magazine, complete with product placements. He sounds like any other aging yuppie futzing around the house or exploring the home-improvement section, boring you to the last dot of consciousness by describing his difficulties in hanging a picture just right and his Ahab-like pursuit of the perfect fixtures: "It was embarrassing to find ourselves sitting

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around the dinner table with friends and going on about faucets, debating the merits of Kohler and Miele. Late at night, we sat side by side glued to the computer, trolling the Internet for the perfect doorknobs." I pray they found them.

Atlas draws solace in the prospect that the house will outlive him and survive as a modest symbol of permanence, citing a passage from another city slicker paying homage to his rustic pile: " 'The road to my house has not changed in two hundred years,' writes David Mamet in his book on Vermont, 'and in one hundred, fifty years perhaps, the dirt road will be paved, the paved road will be lined with homes, the bear, wolf, fox, moose, mountain lion will be gone, as the woods will be gone.' But the house will still be there." How can he be so sure? What makes him so confident that his (or Mamet's) sacred retreat will be spared the bulldozers and earthmovers of suburban sprawl? And what kind of world will it be, shorn of woods and animals and any remnant of nature? Atlas's grandchildren and their children will be inheriting a gravel graveyard. Rather than ponder that, he prefers to ponder this: "Lying in a hammock, I compose my obit for the local paper: ... *died at his home in Manhattan ... survived by his wife and two children ... author of... worked for ... had a home in North Bennington, Vermont.*" And he comments: "That last part comforts me."

This is the obit as resumé. Who's he kidding? Atlas isn't mentally composing his death notice for the local paper but for *The New York Times*, measuring his cultural significance in column inches. Vermont may be Atlas's summer sanctuary, but his professional ego resides year-round in Manhattan, where it has been suffering the sad, inevitable shrinkage that comes from recognizing that the heavyweight crown will never be his. In the chapter chronicling "Failure," Atlas recaps the low points of his career for those scoring at home: the rejection of his antic novel-in-progress by his hero Ted Solotaroff, which put him sobbing under the kitchen table, and then, as mentioned earlier, the public shame of having his first completed novel executed by a firing squad of reviewers—colleagues, no less. "The novel was supposed to be *my* next big thing, and since my first published book, a biography of Delmore Schwartz, had gotten favorable reviews, how could it not do well?"

Then came the savage volley, which made Atlas feel that a part of him had died—the part called hope—and fear that he had become a social leper ("an outcast"), stricken forever from the invite list. He cites a low moment from his journal of those plague days: "Things were going somewhat better for the last two days; then I heard that Ben Sonnenberg [the editor of *Grand Street*] had a party last night to which we weren't invited, and it dawned on me—again—that I've utterly forfeited my place in the New York literary world." I've never been invited to a Ben Sonnenberg mixer, so I must really be in Outer Mongolia, but then I've never thought of "the New York literary world" as anything other than a useful fiction, an illusion loosely binding together a lot of disparate ambitions competing for air and attention—"at cocktail parties where the same freeloaders hunt in packs," as Wilfrid Sheed once observed.

A harder knock to Atlas's foundation was being fired from *The New Yorker*. (He prudently fudges the details, but the reluctant executioner strongly resembles David Remnick.) Anyone who has received the heave-ho can empathize with the sense of impending doom. Atlas knows the ax is poised to fall ("You always know"), and, once the dread news is delivered, he pleads for a lighter sentence. "Why can't you just put me on a reduced contract?" The budget's too tight, he's told. "But what am I going to do? I've got a family to support." His soon-to-be former boss explains that his contract isn't up for three months, which should afford him time to find something new. That night Atlas takes his son to a Rangers game and, to prevent the evening from turning into a pity party, buys two front-row seats, "queasy about what the three-hundred-dollar charge for our two tickets would do to my next month's Visa bill."

Losing a high-paying job near the age of fifty is a major blow. It can instantly drain self-confidence and send one teetering to the brink of insolvency. (Think of all the downsized executives now scraping by as "consultants.") But Atlas backpedals from the intimate drama of the dark moment. How did he break the news to his wife? How did she react? What were their savings at this point? Did he consider selling the house in Vermont? These are not prurient questions.


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**Bard College invites submissions for its annual Fiction Prize for young writers.**

The Bard Fiction Prize is awarded annually to a promising, emerging writer who is a United States citizen aged 39 years or younger at the time of application. In addition to a monetary award of $30,000, the winner receives an appointment as writer-in-residence at Bard College for one semester without the expectation that he or she teach traditional courses. The recipient will give at least one public lecture and will meet informally with students.

To apply, candidates should write a cover letter describing the project they plan to work on while at Bard and submit a C.V., along with three copies of the published book they feel best represents their work. No manuscripts will be accepted.

Applications for the 2005 prize must be received by July 15, 2005. For further information about the Bard Fiction Prize, call 845-758-7087, send an e-mail to bfp@bard.edu, or visit www.bard.edu/bfp. Applicants may also request information by writing to the Bard Fiction Prize, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504-5000.

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The reader justifiably wants to know. But instead of sharing the shockwaves, Atlas dissolves into a misty watercolor flashback of his Lost Illusions of conquering the literary capital when he was a young upstart. "I had come here at the age of twenty-eight, the provincial staking out his literary claim. I had been intoxicated by the city, a kingdom of limitless aspiration, of vast and uncharted possibility." That first bus ride sure must have been something.

Then he catechizes the writers who had woven the witchy spell that lured him to the emerald city, so that we'll know whom to blame. "My head was filled of images of Edmund Wilson.... I was gripped by the story of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* arriving in New York.... I read Alfred Kazin's lyrical memoir of growing up in Brooklyn, *A Walker in the City*, over and over, thrilled by his description of the armored knights in the Metropolitan Museum, the gray whale 'floating dreamlike on wires from the ceiling' in the Museum of Natural History, the skaters in Central Park: it was all there, waiting for me." It's all still there, but now it's waiting for a new young generation of yearning hustlers, Atlas having had his chance, shot his load, and come up short. "We inevitably fall short, no matter how successful we are in the eyes of the world; our ambition outstrips our capability."

To remind himself that he's not hugging his pillow alone, Atlas maintains a "failure file" of former greats and persistent dreamers, such as the "aging rock star wannabe who's been trying to market a CD he recorded with his sister, a jewelry designer, in the basement of his Long Island home." For some reason, this hobby doesn't make him feel any better. Steeped in regret, haunted by mistakes, taunted by his receding hairline, Atlas gnaws on the past. If only he could turn back the pages of time!

> I want to go back and do it all over again, go back and do it right. In my mid-fifties, I begin to understand my strengths and weaknesses, what I'm capable of and what I'm not. I'd make the right choices now.... I wouldn't quit the excellent job I had at the *New York Times* to go off and freelance. I wouldn't, I wouldn't.... Too late! Get over it. And anyway, who's to say that I didn't in the end make the *right* choices—the decisions that, however much pain they caused me at the time, turned out to be the road to freedom. Maybe I'd made those choices in part because I lacked self-knowledge, and in part because I wanted something more. If I failed to grasp the Golden Ring, at least I reached for it.

He sounds like Ralph Kramden, reconciling himself to never hitting the high note, then giving Alice a big hug. Only Atlas is hugging himself.

Atlas is right. Failure is a great American subject, one that shouldn't be solely the joint custody of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. But true abject failure does not consist in losing a cushy magazine post or waking up and realizing that you will never be Lord Byron in a bowtie, fending off groupies at book signings. It's finding yourself after years of striving still relegated to the minors, forced to justify your value and vocation not only to others but to yourself as rejection letters line your musty tomb and the silences grow longer. Let us scroll through the credits that Atlas elliptically skims in his daydream obituary in the hammock. Harvard, Oxford. While still in his twenties, he published a highly praised biography of Delmore Schwarz. He published the novel *The Great Pretender*. He has been, to quote from the book jacket, "an editor for the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Times Magazine* and a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*." He published a mammoth biography of Saul Bellow. He heads up his own line of brief biographies as "the founder of Atlas Books and the general editor of the Eminent Lives series." He has been married for more than a quarter-century and is the father of two grown children, neither of whom is doing time in an upstate facility.

Compare this CV with that of another critic-journalist-editor who once sat down to take midlife inventory. "At 51," wrote Seymour Krim in 1974, "believe it or not, or believe it and pity me if you are young and swift, I still don't know truly 'what I want to be.' I've published several serious books. I rate an inch in Who's Who in America. I teach at a so-called respected university. But in that profuse upstairs delicatessen of mine I'm as open to every wild possibility as I was at 13, although even I know that the chances of acting them out diminish with each heartbeat." Unlike Atlas's father, who moved to California in his retirement years and lived to a hardy age, Krim's father was Willy Lomanized and broken early: "At 50 my father was as built-in as a concrete foundation and at 55 he was crushed out of existence by the superstructure of his life. I have no superstructure except in my head. I literally live alone with my fierce dreams, and my possessions are few." Living alone in his head exacted in Krim a toll concealed until too late in the game:

> We know all along that time is squeezing us into a corner while we mentally rocket to each new star that flares across our sky, and yet we can't help ourselves. We forget that our contemporaries are building up wealth of one kind or another, reputations, consistency, credit in the world, and that it counts for more as age settles down around all of us, the very age we have denied or ignored. In a way, those of us who have lived higher in the mind than on the sidewalk ... have stayed younger than we should have. We have even been sealed off from our own image as seen by others.

The title of Krim's essay was "For My Brothers and Sisters in the Failure Business."

James Atlas is not in the failure business. Never has been. Anyone who has authored a biography that stays justifiably in print and boasts a book imprint bearing his name can hold his tail feathers high, however tatty they are. He has accrued the name recognition, the distinction, and the credit that eluded Krim (who never married) until his suicide in 1989, and after. (None of Krim's essay collections remains in print.) No, failure with a capital F is not what's eating at Atlas, eroding his inner lining. What's eating at him is envy—petty, childish envy. He is locked in its piercing embrace.

In the chapter devoted to Atlas's adventures in therapy, the psychopharmacologist gives him a form to fill out before he prescribes any magic beans. Asked to check off his level of symptoms from one to ten for complaints such as anger and insomnia, Atlas tells the shrink, "You should have a box for envy." If there were a box for envy in *My Life in the Middle Ages*, Atlas would rate an eight or nine,

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because envy pops up and pokes him with a salad fork throughout the book. He lunches with a friend who has just landed a column at a newsweekly, along with a book contract and a movie deal. "Men with recognizable faces—TV commentators, owners of newspapers and magazines, real estate tycoons—occupy the other tables. The cutlery gleams on the blindingly white tablecloth. 'I'm making a shitload of money,' my friend announces—and then names the exact sum. Panic clutches my chest. What did I do wrong?" Some friend.

Everywhere Atlas goes, he's pimp-slapped by acquaintances flaunting their affluence. "A journalist whose byline I often see in *The New York Review of Books*—and who, I happen to know, lives in a town house on the Upper East Side and summers in Rhinebeck—invites me to lunch at that old WASP fortress the Racquet & Tennis Club, on Park Avenue," where he informs Atlas that he is a man of "independent means." "I turn on *Charlie Rose* and there is a guy I know who has just published a book, talking animatedly at the round table. Instantly my stomach knots up: his book will sell, he'll make money, he'll buy a BMW. Already he emanates a prosperous air. Once a scruffy intellectual whose jackets looked as if they were off the rack at the Salvation Army Store [*meow*], he's wearing a tailor-made herringbone suit; his beard is trim, and he's clearly gotten his hair cut at some exclusive men's salon where they glaze it and put you under a dryer."

What Atlas envies in other writers is not their talent or literary achievements, but the outward trappings of success, the high-gloss finish that goes with being able to afford a silver chariot and have your hair glazed by the spirit of Liberace. Even a glimpse of a stranger can make him covetous. Out walking one evening in an unfamiliar city, he is "seized with envy" at the sight of a man's profile in a window reading a book by soft lamplight. "What a perfect life is framed by that window! The man is a well-known writer, a journalist who's putting the last touches on his weekly column for a prestigious journal of opinion," he rhapsodizes inanely, before snapping out of his trance to acknowledge he has no idea who the guy in the window is, he could be just another schmo with his own problems, and if we were able to peer into our own windows like Peeping Toms, we might find much to be grateful for and learn to be content with our own blessings. Now, who wants to carve the turkey? As with *American Sucker* and similar sadder-but-wiser memoirs, the self-acceptance and affirmations come too conveniently on cue to be believable. The chastened writer makes a wise show of stopping to smell the roses when the truth is that he may just have run out of gas (or, in Denby's case, out of dough).

BUT EVEN IF ATLAS BELIEVES he has gotten rampant envy out of his craw, it has already inflicted irremediable damage to his body of work. Unsubdued envy was the undoing of his biography of Saul Bellow, which should have been the crowning glory of his literary career and instead became a garlic necklace. He dwells on the body blow that he received from the bad reviews of his novel, but glances over the heavy-artillery assault on *Bellow: A Biography*, which was far more extensive and bloodying. This is odd. Based upon the aspirations to greatness that Atlas cradled in his bookworm boyhood, Saul Bellow should have been a hero fit for him, the grumbling Johnson to his gee-whizzy Boswell.

Bellow, who died this week, was everything Atlas once found exemplary. A former *Partisan Review* intellectual with his own idiosyncratic, investigative streak. (How many literary cerebrals become infatuated with the esoteric teachings and angelic hierarchies of Rudolf Steiner?) A novelist of ideas who never divorced those ideas from the follies of the flesh, the fluctuations of the soul. A Nobel Prize–winner with best-selling success. A man with a tempestuous personal life (love affairs, marriages, divorces) who, in the winter of his contentment, found a devoted stepson in Martin Amis and enjoyed a creative renaissance with *Ravelstein*. A writer who never debased his talent or boarded a breezy trend for the sake of courting meretricious tastes, who remained on high mental alert his entire life and retained a cagey, acidic humor.

Instead of extending himself to encompass the width, breadth, and depth of Bellow's electrical field, Atlas two-dimensionalized his subject, shrinking him down to pedestrian scale. "From beginning to end [Bellow] is framed in an unchanging posture, and defined by a very limited and limiting repertory of psychological labels and clichés," deplored Richard Poirier in the *London Review of Books*. And as James Wood observed in these pages, "It becomes clear that Atlas is not writing the biography of a freedom-loving mind, of an imagination, but of a seducer, a bad husband, and money-earner who also happened to write some good books (though not since 1965)." Just as bad, perhaps worse, Atlas grades Bellow's literary accomplishments on the pipsqueak criteria of the *New York Times* daily book reviews. When not harping on Bellow's "narcissism" (try finding a great writer innocent of that rap!), he condescendingly convicts Bellow of being hifalutin for assuming undue familiarity with Kant, Goethe, or any of those canonical European word-gods whose names we are now supposed to find pretentious. Animated by what Poirier labeled a "craven hostility" (not a bad working definition of envy), Atlas produced a grudging, unsuccessful middlebrow takedown of a touchy wizard at home in the higher altitudes of thought and still bracingly active.

IN THE CHAPTER ON BOOKS, ATLAS makes peace with his middlebrow comfort zone, justifying his edgy fatigue with fiction's demands on his interest. Literature, in truth, has proved something of a letdown. Books just don't do it for him anymore. He is sympathetic to the sentiment of the critic Arthur Krystal, who mourned, "The sad truth is, I am unable to think seriously about any writer. Instead I think about what every middle-aged, nonliterary person thinks about: family, health insurance, money, property, time running

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out." That's what preoccupies Atlas, too. Where Edmund Wilson was learning languages in his seventies and Atlas's father was "stuffing Plato and Dante into his forgetful head" in his eighties, Atlas no longer sees the point in restocking the pantry, since it's all going to go stale anyway. "What good will it do to learn about Locke and Hobbes, Voltaire and Rousseau at this point? I've already read them once, in college, and can't remember a single thing about any of these guys except that Hobbes thought life was 'nasty, brutish and short.' So why go through the whole thing again?" Been there, done that, so why make your head hurt? Besides, there aren't the leisure hours to read all the new books that he compulsively buys by the armload and the magazines that pile up. Physically, he may feel rundown, going to pot, but mentally he has become a speed skater. "It's a commonplace to confess that you haven't read a book, just the reviews of it. Now even the reviews are more than I can manage," he writes. "Never mind the trial, just give me the verdict, please: thumbs-up or -down. That's all I need to know. That's all I have time to know."

Much of what Atlas says about his attention-deficit reading syndrome is inarguable. Cell phones, BlackBerries, iPods, online gambling, blogs, and the exploding cable universe have fragmented the attention span into ever tinier snack-bites. It can be liberating to get out from under the dutiful pretense of being a perennial English major always meaning to finish *Middlemarch* or finally tackling that boxed edition of *The Man Without Qualities* that you have been using as a doorstop. If Atlas has never read *Northanger Abbey* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, so be it. In his own words, "Let it go." But when he claims, about his literary opinions, "I'm more independent than I used to be," he is mistaking newfound independence for the path of least resistance. He is not more independent in his literary tastes and opinions, he is simply more indifferent.

Anyway, he was never that independent to begin with. Even as an eager pup, Atlas's responses and viewpoints were so contingent on the prevailing winds of the New York publishing world that he always seemed to be hedging his bets. He wanted to be a literary lion but was afraid to let out the occasional roar. I cannot recall him ever championing a victim of literary negligence or debunking a major fraud, which would be fine (not everyone has to be a buccaneer) if his prose threw some keen, crisp jabs. But Atlas always wrote as if he wanted approval, which crimped his range of motion in criticism. If he cares less about approval now, it is because there are fewer to bestow it, fewer who care. The mistake was craving approval in the first place, which makes one needy and spongy, and leaves one unfortified when fashions change.

Despite its humor (the chapter on "The Body" is quite funny—"No more cheeseburgers with bacon: I'd eat two bites and slump over the table like an outlaw shot in a bar fight"), cranky asides, and exposed nerves, *My Life in the Middle Ages* is such a wan exercise because Atlas never seems to have gotten jazzed from writing, never experienced that guns-blazing feeling; and the lack of enjoyment fosters his larger sense of unfulfillment. A line from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" serves as the inscription on his father's gravestone—"I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled"—but it is the son who resembles Eliot's timid bundle of nerves, fearful of disturbing the universe, biting into that peach. This is a man in his fifties who looks forward to meditation sessions at a Buddhist center because "for the next half hour no one would talk to me, meaning no one would have the opportunity to hurt or reject me." He says in his final pages that he is less of a sad sack in his late maturity, more able to stand up for himself, tolerate nuisances, endure solitude, and appreciate what he has. All very commendable, but it sounds like a man resigned to spending his golden years kicking field goals at dusk. ■

## *Adam Kirsch*

# Spoken Bread

**COLLECTED POEMS 1954–2004**
**By Irving Feldman**
***(Schocken, 436 pp., $28.50)***

THE LAST POEM IN IRVING Feldman's *Collected Poems* is the short, playful "Versions of Proteus":

> Was turning—wasn't he?—
> when
> you grasped him that he was you
> were Proteus in the throe
> of grasping himself loosing
> losing Proteus, weren't you?

The lines are as slippery as Proteus himself, the pronouns continually changing place until it is impossible to tell the poet from the reader, or either from the Homeric shapeshifter. This makes the poem a perfect envoi to Feldman's work, since the poet's metamorphoses of style and mood make him exceptionally hard to pin down.

If Feldman, despite a long career that has brought him some of the highest honors in American letters, is little known to the general public—or even, despite the standard euphemism of "a poet's poet," to most other poets—it is mainly because of this profound variousness. He cannot be easily slotted into any of the schools that have dominated American poetry since World War II—New Critical formalism, confessionalism, deep image, and the rest. But neither is his the proficient versatility of the omnicompetent "craftsman." Instead, Feldman's work—much of it now brought back into print for the first time in years—can only be described in paradoxes: he is at once visionary and satirical, naïve and jaded, prosy and lyrical. His poems do not try to seduce, to overawe, or to buttonhole the reader; instead, they burst in on us from odd angles, awkward and insistent.

A sampling of his first lines shows how hard it is to know in advance what to expect from a Feldman poem:

> Arriving at last, he threw down the
> burden from
> his back, his hump, the mailpouch
> his father.

> Shipped deckhand June of 'fifty-one

*Adam Kirsch's new book,* THE WOUNDED SURGEON: CONFESSION AND TRANSFORMATION IN SIX AMERICAN POETS, *has just been published by Norton.*

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aboard the *Willis Van Devanter*.

There is no singing without God.

Snuff a senator for a wart?

These random examples show that Feldman's range extends from realism to surrealism, from anecdote to parable. Over the half-century documented in his *Collected Poems*, he has generally moved in the direction of greater coherence and simpler storytelling. But even in his first books, *Works and Days* (1961) and *The Pripet Marshes* (1965), Feldman was a sharp observer and chronicler of his Jewish New York milieu; and even in his most recent work, he is prone to strange visions and metaphysical ecstasies.

THESE TWO POLES OF FELDMAN'S work find common ground in what is certainly his favorite subject: children and the world of childhood. Throughout this volume, he returns to early family memories with an alienated affection reminiscent of Delmore Schwartz. Like Schwartz, too, Feldman is not much interested in verbal elegance, preferring a headlong, elbows-out, demotic style:

Dull, but fathers, and exotic in a
faintly
swarthy way, and practical about
their women
who can't let anything alone with
their long noses
and short fuses, and dish-busting
politics,
and their big mouths and spitefulness
and vanities....

The "fathers" described in these lines are actually Greeks, as seen "At Pasha's First Avenue Café, 1954"; but they and their difficult wives resemble the Jewish relatives and neighbors who populate Feldman's poetry. When it comes to fathers, Feldman is as ambivalent as Kafka, whose parables clearly influenced his early work. In "The Father," from *Magic Papers* (1970), Feldman writes of a father who, in his impotence and distance, resembles the Heavenly Father:

Who is He? and by what right made
us
not as we are not but as we are?
or loses us and then are neither?
And must we leave these ways,
this shining,
such creatures, and the lion and bear
to His bad accounting and His
inconstant care?

In this disillusioned perspective, the father appears "humiliated, his ambitions broken,/and never, certainly, a lion at heart." Yet in Feldman's next book, *Lost Originals* (1972), "Hump" turns the father figure into a grotesque monster, a shapeshifter like Proteus and a child-eater like Saturn:

Then I'll eat you up, you worstwurst,
you father
—fodder, huffed the gnome,
puffing and swelling
and showing the sharkshead that
grew from his back.
For I am thy father-farter,
thy thunder-thudder!

This poem, one of Feldman's strangest, degenerates at times into a catalogue of *Finnegans Wake*–style puns and sound effects ("mouthoozemuse/titwitwoostalk/stablebabelburble"). Yet as happens surprisingly often in Feldman's work, the rawness and the awkwardness are subsumed in a larger emotional intensity. The unsociability of these poems prevents them from becoming perfect wholes, but it also gives the sense of a poet singlemindedly consumed by his visions.

THE FATHER ADDRESSED IN "Hump" and other poems may or may not be Feldman's own, but he is also, without question, a biblical patriarch, the guardian of Feldman's Jewish heritage. "I am your father/and your father's fathers," the "gnome" rails at him; "Pisgah my./Sinai. Moriah my. My Ararat." And inevitably, in these poems written in the 1950s and 1960s, that heritage is seen through the dark lens of the Holocaust. Much of *The Pripet Marshes*, Feldman's second book, is explicitly about the Holocaust, including the title poem and "To the Six Million." These poems, especially the latter, do not wholly avoid the danger of moral melodrama, of making a performance of the poet's own grief:

Who I am I do not know,
but I believe myself to be one
who should have died, and the
dead one
who did die.

But "The Pripet Marshes" is another of Feldman's unlikely successes, an unsubtle and in some ways manipulative poem that is nevertheless moving in its sincerity. In it, he imagines his own friends and relatives in a shtetl, "the moment before the Germans will arrive":

Maury is there, uncomfortable, and
pigeon-toed, his voice is rapid
and slurred, and he is brilliant;
And Frank who is good-hearted and
has the hair and yellow skin of a
Tartar and is like a flame turned
low;
And blond Lottie who is coarse and
miserable, her full mouth is turning
down with a self-contempt she can
never hide, while the steamroller of
her voice flattens every delicacy....

This is a self-torturing exercise, designed to make the poet's anxiety more exquisite. Yet by dwelling on the unloveliness of his loved ones, Feldman makes us feel their indisputable and irreplaceable individualities, their souls.

The most impressive thing in Feldman's work is his firm, constant intuition of the reality of the soul. Seldom does he speculate in the abstract about divine things. His pantheism—a mystical sense

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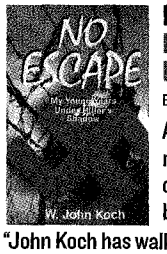

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of the oneness of things, persisting through all flux—is revealed in action, in his records of epiphanies and meditations. Sometimes this takes a nearly Whitmanesque form, as in the nighttime reverie of "A Balcony in Barcelona":

> Grand burial in the air,
> the stars in procession—is it my body
> there,
> my eye following it aloft over the city
> and over all and on and out of the
> world?

To end the exile of personhood and dissolve into the whole—"to unloose and subside, and seep away," as he writes in "Elegies"—is Feldman's exalted, swooning desire. But this desire does not lead him to turn away from the actual, or to stare dreamily past it toward an abstract transcendence. Instead his mysticism is thoroughly immanent, "the deepest dream come back as the common place." Feldman finds the divine principle in human beings, in landscape and seascape, and above all in language.

ALREADY IN HIS FIRST BOOK, Feldman expresses a sense that language has the potential to express ultimate realities, to name things truly. But as the title of "The Lost Language" suggests, he finds that power occluded. This loss is confounded, but not strictly identified, with the loss of Yiddish after the Holocaust—the language he calls "*liebe brayt*," beloved bread:

> O then there were words in the earth
> That were the things they named
> And lay like manna in easy reach,
> And when you spoke, there was
> speech.

The metaphor of language as bread, the primal sustenance, returns again and again in Feldman's work. Language sustains because it is in some sense equiprimordial with Creation itself, not just an arbitrary code but a set of divinely ordained names. This notion, an old tradition of Jewish mysticism, is further elaborated in "The Word":

> The sacred tomes, however, repeat
> endlessly
> the one word "bread," which,
> with shining eyes,
> he reads aloud over and over.
> A bread that escapes the mouth,
> that dilates
> in the air, transparent to the sky,
> the stream, the trellised walks—
> so sweet,
> the bread of all these,
> the unconsumable
> one, invisible, unheard, it is
> spoken bread....

If this sort of "spoken bread" is a "lost language," it is not just because the world is fallen after the Holocaust. Increasingly, as Feldman's work matures, the fall begins to seem less historical than existential, a condition of adult life. And the realm of wholeness, in turn, becomes associated with childhood.

CHILDREN ARE THE SUBJECT and provocation of Feldman's oddest, most unaccountable poems. The innocence of children, in his work, is not at all psychological; his autobiographical poems leave no doubt that the child is privy to all kinds of resentment, aggression, and fear. It is, rather, a metaphysical innocence, part of a nearly Platonic belief that the child's soul is closer to its celestial origins. That seems to be the significance of the title of *Lost Originals*, in which poem after poem expounds on the Wordsworthian sense that "heaven lies about us in our infancy":

> If there was another life,
> he hardly remembers it now, or if
> he came this way on a particular
> errand, and cannot declare for certain
> this is the place he started for.

Thus the infant of "Birth Day," whose birth is literally, as in the Immortality Ode, "a sleep and a forgetting." It is in order to dramatize this radical innocence that Feldman so often depicts children with the obsessive primitivism of Blake or even Henry Darger. Such precursors come to mind in Feldman's "The Jumping Children," which is just that, an image of jumping children:

> The children with the largest pinions
> leap lowest, endure longest, appear
> in their endless hovering hardly to
> move at all....
> eager to jump from the
> embrace of your fantasy, to be
> actual children who press bright
> bobbing faces against the high
> windows and peer into the
> darkened room....

Such overly literal, deliberately naïve tableaux—"disposed," to borrow lines from Feldman's poem "Beethoven's Bust," "as if they occurred/on a picture's visionary plane,/neutral, full, abstract, eternal"—occur whenever children are his subject. Thus we find a "band of children struggling in the surge/of a purely green and sunlit field," in "The Marvel Was Disaster"; and "children ... advancing in me/to greet the little boat bearing the wide bliss/and lead it lamb-like ashore," in "Three Tales"; or, most extensively, in the late poem "The Little Children of Hamelin":

> " 'We'll follow our children and be
> like children, too'
> —for what you left behind you gave
> away,
> and what you shall refuse to claim
> is more and more
> abundance you bestow. A world so
> abounding
> is a world of innocence and a world
> without death."

Feldman's refusal of irony at moments like these allows his sentimentality about children to become unsettling, and therefore unconsoling. For there is rarely the suggestion, in these poems, that we can regain the innocence of childhood. At best we can remember it, in the moments of ecstasy or epiphany that many of Feldman's poems set out to capture.

HERE AGAIN, WHEN EVOKING the sense of union with God-or-Nature, Feldman's estranging naïveté serves him well. Light, that simplest and oldest of metaphors for God's glory, is treated with the same guilelessness and perspectivelessness as Feldman's children. "Light/looks back at light, star sees star," he writes in "The Gift of Life"; or, in "The Ecstasies," "a wonder of water where he moved and touched/the light, saw the transparency, always/light moving, the clear ecstasy."

But it would be wrong to assume that Feldman's genuine mysticism leaves his poetry bloodless and otherworldly. He is a poet also of mundanity. From the beginning, but increasingly in his late work, he is a storyteller, a satirist, even a comedian. Many of his narrative poems revolve around sex and the battle of the sexes; if Feldman likes his children pure, he seems to like women best when they are violent and passionate. In "Seeing

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Red," he remembers the regular tirades of a neighbor across the airshaft in his childhood tenement:

> Twice a week, fantastic and
> compelled,
> Bette Davis in her latest film,
> beyond the half-drawn window shade,
> voice
> ablaze, she yanked a suitcase off the
> bed,
> unloosed the death ray of a
> drop-dead stare,
> the parting gusts of her furious red
> head.
> "You'll see!" she screamed and
> slammed the door.

That woman seems like the Platonic original of many of the lovers Feldman goes on to write about, such as the beloved of "To What's Her Name": "your smile's faint/fume of vitriol, your sudden, awful,/gulped-down squeal when you inched in for the kill." Yet the cumulative effect of all these angry women is not to make Feldman seem like a misogynist beset by harpies. Rather, like Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose neurotic women Feldman's bring to mind, he seems drawn to the unstable by an answering instability in himself.

The subject that most clearly exposes Feldman's own rough edges is the professional life of the poet. Feldman writes bitterly of poetic egoism and competition for status; he delights in attacks on poets who are ensconced in what he calls the "Hell of Fame." That pun comes from a wildly satirical poem, "Read to the Animals, *or* Orpheus at the SPCA," which uses Feldman's favored technique of responding to a foolish quotation by a celebrated poet (in this case, Philip Levine). Cast as a letter from the animals in a shelter to the poet, asking him to come give a reading, it turns into a lament for poetry's professional deformation, what Milton called "the last infirmity of noble minds":

> Give us fame-rabies just like them
> other cats.
> I *seen* them on fire, raging and
> thrashing
> to get theirself comfortable and
> couldn't
> —their bodies all red with burning
> rashes....

In his last two books, many poems debunk minor idols of the age, especially Paul Goodman, Gregory Corso, and Allen Ginsburg. There is something unseemly about these poems, which are not immune from the literary jockeying that they attack. And generally Feldman's later, clearer, more narrative poems are less challenging than his earlier work. At their best, they employ what might be called the higher shtick—the kind Saul Bellow often uses, as in the imaginary letters in *Herzog*—to make serious points: an odd anecdotal poem about listening to Larry King's late-night radio program turns into a moving consideration of loneliness. Other poems remain jokes, routines—such as, appropriately enough, "Funny Bones, *or* Larry Dawn's 1001 Nights in Condolandia," about a bad borscht-belt comedian. These late poems might be the most accessible point of entry to the *Collected Poems*, but they are only one side of Feldman's talent, and not the strangest or the most interesting side.

To see Feldman at his best, turn to "All of Us Here," the long title poem of the book that he published in 1986, and certainly his masterpiece. In this suite of poems, Feldman moves through and meditates on an exhibition of George Segal's white plaster statues. These figures, at once archetypes and parodies of human beings, provoke Feldman to some of his best writing on all his major themes: history, violence, compassion, death; the soul, the city, and the divine. It seems only a matter of time before "All of Us Here" is recognized as one of the major poems of its period. But such worldly recognition or its absence, however heatedly Feldman may write about it, is finally less important than the simple fact of what he has achieved in his *Collected Poems*:

> it seems to us now no great thing to
> be a Thing,
> of rather less importance than the flux
> and prompt delivery of information
> about it. ■

## CORRESPONDENCE

*Continued from page 4*

### LEFT BEHIND

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK MARTIN Peretz for the clearest-eyed critique of liberalism I have yet read ("Not Much Left," February 28). I have no use for the 1960s, and little tolerance for the vestiges of '60s liberalism, with its knee-jerk approval of communist revolutionaries and numbing tolerance. Yet, given the choice, I would like to consider myself a liberal. After September 11, I felt in my gut that something very bad was approaching (Islamic fascism was already here, so it wasn't that). I felt that we were about to see conservatism up close and ugly, and I was right. The half-truths and distortions, the simplicity and arrogance, the brutality and jingoism: It was unleashed. There was no satisfaction in being right. But, if conservatism is ugly, what is a liberal, anyway? A member of a teachers' union? A pro-choicer? A black person? An animal rights activist? Who are these single-label people? I'm none of them. I'm a white male, have kids, own a house, run my own business. The Democratic Party doesn't have an interest group to represent guys like me, so we're really nowhere.

The Republicans have long been derided as the party of greed, the party of power. But they are also the party with a narrative, and you have to respect that. You can boil the GOP story down into about three sentences: "More power to the individual. Less government oversight. Promotion of American ideals through all means necessary." The Democrats have no narrative and no storyteller. There are only loose ideas running around and snipping at each other's heels. Liberalism is not dead. But it has yet to find its voice, understand its application in the modern world, or write its narrative. Maybe Peretz's refreshing essay will stir a national discussion about who we are as Americans and what that really means. Perhaps, at the end of it, I can call myself a liberal. Regardless, the Republican Party faces only two possible roads: It will either return to its status as a party of marginalized cranks barking about how the world is going to hell in a handbasket, or it will become the party of the new liberalism, just by a different name.

**JON VANZILE**
***Pompano Beach, Florida***

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## WASHINGTON DIARIST

# Superstar

HE WAS AN ACTOR. AND HIS greatest and most innovative skill as pontiff was the creation of drama and symbolism. You only had to observe one of his peripatetic papal visits to see that, as I was lucky enough to do in San Antonio. The modern-looking stage, the vast crowds that this Pope knew he could summon anywhere in the world, the carefully planned photo-ops—they all created a series of mirrors focusing back on the man himself. He communicated as much by stirring addresses in dozens of languages as by a deeply creased brow, a smile, or a tear. This dramatization of self continued until his death. We have been told that his last gesture was an attempt to bless the huge crowd assembled outside St Peter's. He was on stage until the end.

BEFORE HIM, NONE OF THIS WAS IMAGINable. Karol Wojtyla took the painstakingly acquired, centuries-long mystique of the secluded, scared papacy and cashed it in across the globe. His superstar presence alone was the overwhelming message—whether to those in Africa who felt excluded from the global church; or to the Poles chafing under Soviet tyranny; or to those Catholics in Central and South America battling poverty, inequality, and the growing force of evangelical Protestantism. Even English Catholics felt something profound when the Pope visited Great Britain for the first time since the Reformation. The Church had always understood the importance of pageantry and drama and personality. But Wojtyla actually reinvented the form for a world of mass media.

IT TOOK A WHILE TO REALIZE THAT THIS personalization of the Church—and its identification with one man before all others—was more than drama. Wojtyla leveraged this new stardom to reassert a far older idea of the papacy—as the central, unaccountable force in the Church. The Second Vatican Council had opened authority up, placing the hierarchy on a more equal footing with the lay faithful in understanding the tenets of faith. It had also led to all sorts of chaotic improvisation and confusion. Wojtyla shut this process down—the good alongside the bad. He didn't reverse the Council (it was beyond his will or power). But he ignored and suppressed it in critical areas. National churches were given little leeway. Dissent within the Church was forbidden. The Pope silenced even debate of issues that were not of fundamental doctrinal importance, such as the prudential, managerial questions of whether priests could marry or whether women could become priests. These, he asserted, were eternal arrangements that were beyond discussion, even if maintaining them had led to a crisis in the Church's very existence in some countries.

THIS MAN SO HOSTILE TO INTELLECTUAL debate was, paradoxically, an intellectual, although an idiosyncratic one. His faith was a strange mixture of esoteric phenomenological reflections and medieval attachments to various saints, miracles, and practices. He made few fundamental changes. But he resolutely appointed loyalists to every position he could, and he elevated the secretive and ultra-conservative order of Opus Dei to unheard-of influence. On matters of human sexuality and the "culture of life," he moved Catholic teaching away from prudential balance to eternal absolutes—that life is equally sacred, whether it is a nanosecond after conception or decades into a persistent vegetative state. The distinctions made by Catholics in the past—between, say, a naturally aborted embryo and a third-trimester baby, or between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" means for maintaining life—were downplayed. Why? Perhaps because the Pope believed the danger of new technologies required as radical an opposition as possible.

DID HE SUCCEED? IF, BY SUCCESS, WE mean the maintenance of the truth in the face of error, then only God knows. If, by success, we mean asserting the truths of Christianity against the lies of communism, then the answer is an unequivocal yes. But if, by success, we mean winning the argument against secular democracy in the West, the answer must be no. This European Pope oversaw an unprecedented collapse of the Church in its European heartland. Under his papacy, vocations for the priesthood barely kept up with population in the developing world and simply collapsed in the West. Protestantism boomed in South America. Mass attendance in North America fell, along with donations. And the quality of the priesthood went from mediocre to terrible. If you judge a successful leader by the caliber of men he inspires to follow him, then the judgment on John Paul II is damning.

UNDER HIS PAPACY, THE CHURCH WAS also guilty of allowing the rape and molestation of vast numbers of children and teenagers, and of systematically covering the crimes up. It is hard to understand how the leader of any lay organization would have stayed in office after allowing such criminality. But how the leader of the Catholic Church survived without even an attempt at papal accountability is still astonishing. A Pope who devoted enormous energy to explicating why the only moral expression of human sexuality is marital heterosexual intercourse presided over the rape of thousands of children by his own priests. What was his response? He protected the chief enabler of the abuse in the United States, Cardinal Bernard Law, and used the occasion of his own Church's failing to blame homosexuals in general. Attempting to grapple with the real question would have meant a debate about priestly celibacy, homosexuality, pedophilia, and the Church's disproportionately gay priesthood. But this Pope was far more interested in closing debates than in opening them.

I HAVE A PERSONAL STAKE IN THIS AS well, of course. I'm a Catholic now withdrawn from Communion whose entire adult life has been in Wojtyla's shadow. And, as a homosexual, I watched as the Church refused to grapple with even basic questions and ran, terrified, from its own deep psychosexual dysfunction. "Be not afraid," this Pope counseled us. But he was deeply afraid of the complicated truth about human sexuality and the dark truth about his own Church's crimes. This was a Pope who, above all, knew how to look away. How else do you warmly embrace Yasir Arafat and Tariq Aziz without moral judgment? But people—faithful people—noticed where he couldn't look. And they grieved, even as, in the aftermath of this brittle, showboating papacy, they now hope.

**ANDREW SULLIVAN**

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# Judging Charter Schools

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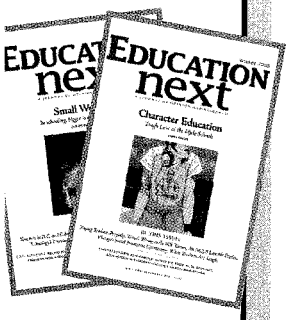


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Are charter schools succeeding or failing? The answer depends on which study—and which newspaper—you read. If you rely on the *New York Times*—almost never a good thing to do on this topic—you might conclude that U.S. charter schools are a disaster area. If you read the *Denver Post,* you'll see that Colorado charter schools are outperforming that state's district-operated public schools. *USA Today* reports "mixed results," and the *Washington Post* focuses on the difficulty of making reliable comparisons.

What to believe? I have been watching, studying, and reading about charter schools since the birth of this idea fourteen years ago. Here are my five (current) conclusions:

1. **There is no dispute about the charter school movement's growth to 3,300 schools enrolling close to a million children.**

2. There is little disagreement about charters' popularity with parents anxious to get their kids out of failing, heedless, and frequently dangerous district schools but too poor to afford private schools. Many charters have waiting lists; but for arbitrary caps and fiscal constraints imposed by their political foes, there'd be many more of them attended by many more youngsters.

3. The old allegation that charters would "cream" the ablest kids from the most fortunate homes turns out to be dead wrong. They enroll, on average, more poor and minority youngsters than nearby district schools, and many of their pupils arrive with dreadful academic records or having already dropped out. It turns out that's *why* they enroll: their parents are desperate.

4. Putting the word "charter" over a schoolhouse door assures neither success nor failure. These schools are astoundingly diverse. Some are the highest-performing schools in town. Others are total messes. At the end of the day, what makes the good ones succeed is akin to what makes good public (and private) schools succeed: effective leadership, a clear and focused mission, a dedicated team of competent adults, high expectations for all students combined with plenty of individual attention, and so on. What the charter designation does is create the opportunity to build such schools with less bureaucratic (and teacher union) hassle.

5. **What we most want to know about charter schools isn't how they are currently performing against fixed standards but how much their students learn while enrolled in them.** Some people call this the "academic value added" by the school itself. Yet despite the myriad of dueling studies, there's virtually no data yet that speak to the value-added question, nor can it be answered by the comparisons that newspaper articles focus on.

It is not just that better research is needed. The reason not to be swayed by the current crop of studies is that, while some are done by honest scholars, many are the work of interest groups with political agendas—and all of their results are being used for political ends. It is way too early to pronounce the charter movement a success or failure. But surely it's an experiment worth continuing—and studying.

—Chester E. Finn Jr.

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*Chester E. Finn Jr. is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution; chairman of Hoover's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education; and president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.*

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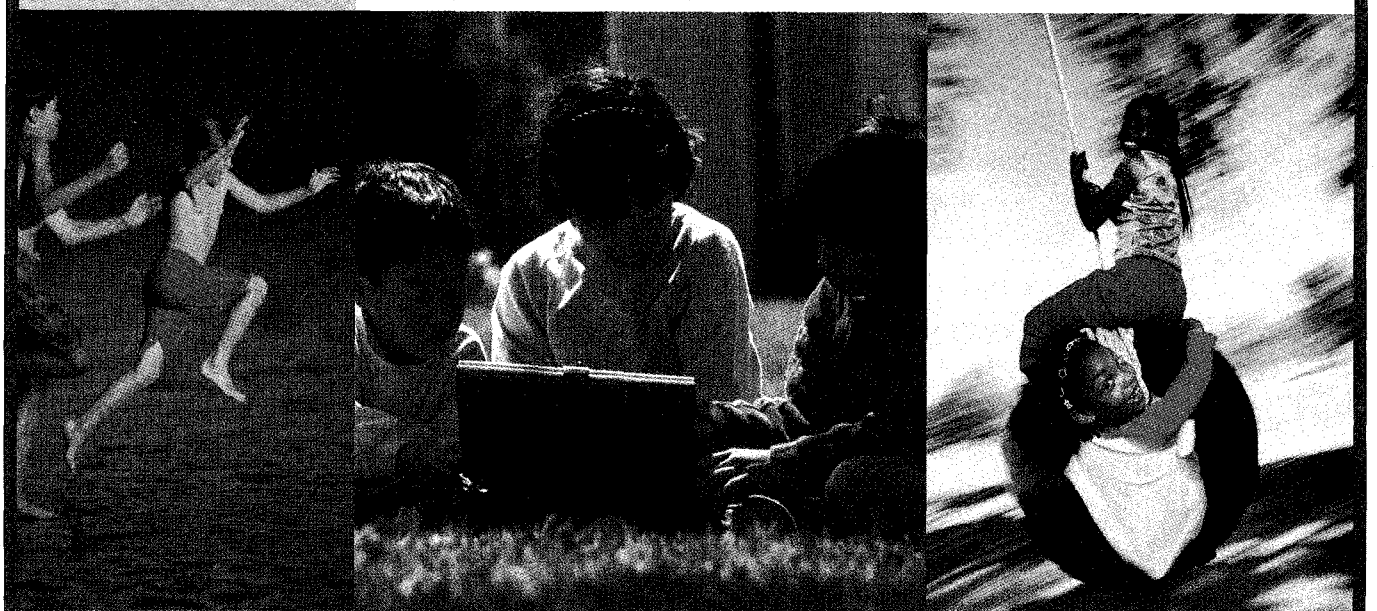

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